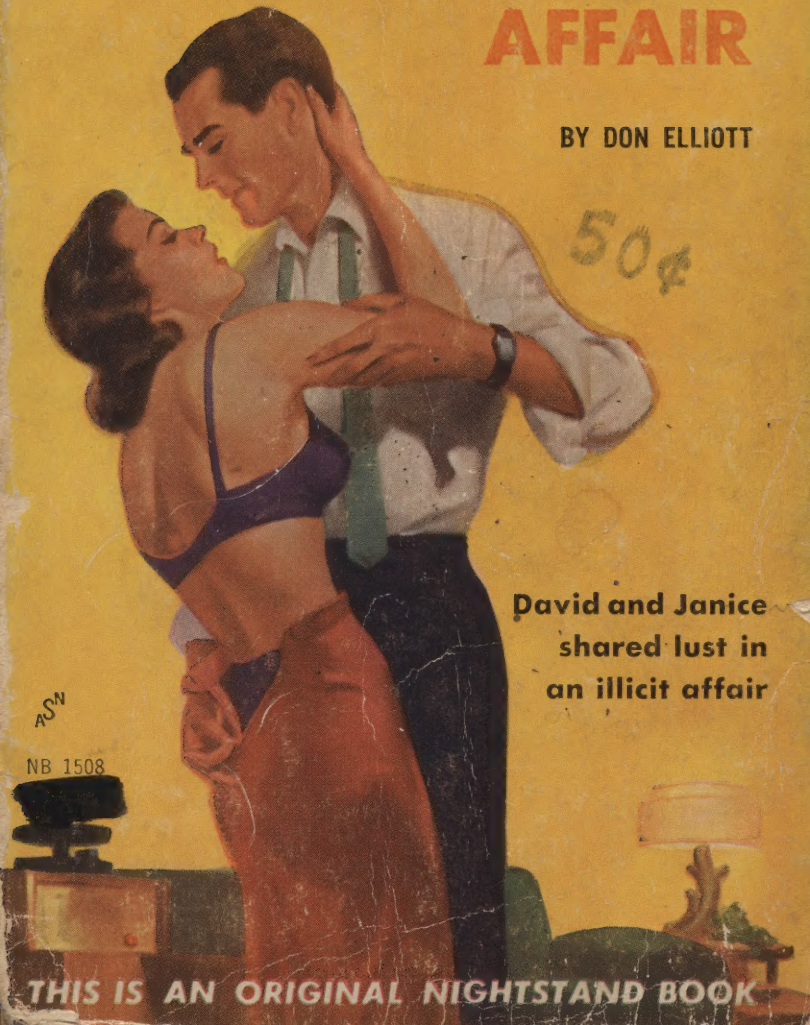
A FRANK NOVEL OF INFIDELITY

SUMMERTIME AFFAIR

BY DON ELLIOTT

50¢



David and Janice shared lust in an illicit affair

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Have you ever seen a girl you wanted so much, your body ached with the want? Have you ever stolen a frenzied kiss at a party, when your wife wasn't looking? Have you ever known passion's damning fire and then lived to call yourself adulterer? If you haven't, then this book will be a revelation, an unveiling of human emotions so powerful they may stagger you. But . . .

IF YOU HAVE CHEATED ON YOUR WIFE

then David Hughes will not seem a stranger. He will seem a little like you. You will recognize and understand his open desire for a girl so beautiful it hurt to look at her. You will feel the same sensations in your stomach as David Hughes takes her, violently, completely, sinfully.

For This Book Is About You!

Summertime Affair

By DON ELLIOTT

AN ORIGINAL NIGHTSTAND BOOK

SUMMERTIME AFFAIR

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PRINTED AND BOUND
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOUSE WAS FRANTIC THAT MORNING, as everyone rushed to get ready for the big trip. The only one who was calm was the one who was not going: David Hughes, who was staying behind in the sweltering city while his wife and children went up into the cool mountains for a summer of swimming and sunning. Hughes would join his family on weekends, and if he could arrange it he would spend the last two weeks in August with them. But now he was mentally readying himself for a temporary return to bachelorhood. And through his mind, over and over again like the unstoppable return of a haunting melody, went the thought, the brand new thought, that had worked its way into his consciousness for the first time the night before:

I'm on my own again.

I'm my own boss.

I'm free to do a little stepping out—if I can find someone to step out with.

Only twice before, in nine years of marriage, had he been in the same sort of position. And both those times had been during Ellen's pregnancies, when he was too harried and worried and busy visiting the hospital to think of doing any philandering. Besides, their marriage had been much younger, then. They had still been in love, not merely on the surface but deep down.

To cheat on Ellen then would have been unthinkable. Now, the situation was altogether different.

Things had not been going so well in their marriage lately. That was why he felt he had some sort of moral justification for fooling around outside the marriage bed. As far as he was concerned, he had remained a faithful, loving husband. What the slick women's story magazines called a "Good Provider." Yet, despite his best efforts to keep the warmth of their marriage alive, Ellen had gradually grown cool toward him. She seemed too busy to make love, most evenings. Or too tired, or too spent-up. When he reached for her in bed, she was full of stories about Tony's running nose or Erika's scraped knee.

He resented the way she had allowed their sex life to cool. He didn't see any reason why she should be any less passionate now than she had been nine years earlier. The fact remained, though, that she was. When they *did* make love, she en-

joyed it just as thoroughly as she had of old, but the intervals between each act grew longer and longer each year.

He still had plenty of desire. Ellen failed to gratify that desire now. And, for the first time in a long while, he had both motive and opportunity to pick up some outside loving if he could.

I'm free to do a little stepping out, Hughes thought again.

He stood in the livingroom, letting Ellen buzz around him like a busy insect as she finished the tidying-up job. It was Saturday morning, a crisp fresh morning early in July. In half an hour, Hughes' sister Beth would come over in the station wagon to pick Ellen and the kids up. They had rented a bungalow in the mountains ninety miles from New York. Beth and her two children would occupy the lower floor of the rambling cottage, Ellen and *her* two children the upper floor. The two sisters-in-law would share the household chores, cutting them to a minimum and allowing the maximum possible rest and vacation for the smallest possible outlay of cash. The two husbands, Hughes and his brother-in-law Mike Niles, would drive up together on Friday afternoons, staying until Sunday afternoon.

Ellen flashed by, looking gay and petite in her tight slacks, cotton jersey, and pony-tail. The idea of going away for a whole summer seemed to have revivified her. Ellen was thirty-one—three years younger than Hughes—but right now she seemed miraculously shunted back in time so that she looked no older than twenty-three or twenty-four. Yet during the spring just passed, she had often

seemed much older to Hughes—thirty-five or forty when she was doing the housework, sixty-five or seventy when it came time to get into bed with her husband.

But now she was all smiles and gaiety. "Help me get the suitcases out front, dear," she called, breezing past. "Beth's going to be here any minute."

"She won't be here before ten, and you know it," Hughes reminded her.

"Be a dear and carry them out anyway," Ellen said.

He found the suitcases in the hallway and rang for the elevator. They lived on the third floor of a six-story apartment house in a quiet residential district of Queens. Beth and Mike Niles lived in Queens, too—but in a $40,000 house in Jamaica Estates, not in a $100-a-month apartment in Forest Hills.

The elevator came. Hughes and his son got in. Tony was seven and big for his age, and everyone said he was the absolute miniature of his father. Hughes didn't see much of a resemblance—Tony was a wiry little redhead, his father stocky and brown-haired—but he was flattered at the suggestion, anyway. The kid was going to grow up to be a good-looking devil, Hughes thought. A regular heart-breaker.

Tony was one of the reasons that their marriage held together. The other big reason was Erika. Hughes was wild about the kids. He might have quarrelled with Ellen more, might have released some of the tension fermenting in his system, except that he was doggedly determined to give the kids

a happy home, and that involved keeping the home free of cat-and-dog type quarrelling between mother and father. He remembered how his own parents had roasted each other over every minor item of friction that came up, and how he had fled the house when he could to escape the constant battling.

He wanted none of that for his own kids. He wanted them to be happy. And so, for their sake, he kept his troubles to himself. He let them fester and bubble in his guts, and occasionally let them come to the surface in the privacy of the bedroom. But he knew that Ellen did not fully understand what the actual situation was between them.

He had thought of divorce, too. But it was impossible, because of the kids. He was bound to Ellen for life by Tony and Erika. He had to consider their happiness before his own.

In front of the house, Hughes said, "You stay down here and watch the suitcases, Antonio."

"Sure, Dad."

"And watch for Aunt Beth. Ring the lobby bell when you see her."

"Uh-huh. Big blue Chrysler."

Hughes shook his head. "No, she'll be driving the station wagon, Tony. Watch for it."

He turned and went back inside. Obscurely it irritated him that his son would have made such a casual reference to the Niles' two-car status. Big blue Chrysler and a station wagon—well, why not? Niles did okay for himself, writing scripts for that television comedy program. The job would kill him by the time he was fifty, but he'd leave a rich widow behind. Anybody making $35,000 a year at the age

of thirty was doing okay for himself, Hughes admitted. But it griped him that it had to be his own sister's husband making all that money.

Even though seven years had gone by since Beth had married Mike Niles, Hughes still had trouble adjusting to the notion of his kid sister as a married woman—especially as a well-to-do- married woman. He remembered her most clearly as she had looked on the day of his own wedding, nine years back. She had been twenty, then, a senior at Hunter, and for the first time he had noticed that she was a grownup woman, as she stunned him with her revealing pink gown. It had come as a shock to him to make the full realization that his baby sister was a sexy female with full white breasts and curving hips, a mature woman who had periods and wore a bra and no doubt was already quite proficient at making love with that Niles fellow she was dating.

Seeing her that way, at the wedding, had shattered his previous image of Beth—which pictured her as a tall, gawky, breathless thirteen-year-old, all neck and knobby knees. Yet it was that image which still lingered, even now, when Beth was Mrs. Michael Niles, mother of two, owner of her own car and a nine-room house and a diamond ring big as the Koh-i-noor.

Let's face it, he thought. *You're jealous. You're jealous of Mike because he makes more money than you do, and because he probably has a better time in bed with his wife than you do with yours, and because most likely he's had plenty of other women on the side.*

The idea that Niles might have been unfaithful to Beth made Hughes momentarily angry. He didn't want to see any man treating his sister that way, he thought—and then he smiled, remembering that he was right now in the midst of planning to deceive his own wife in the selfsame way. *Let's not get holier-than-thou, man,* he told himself. *If Niles has stepped out on Beth, it's no business of mine. None at all.*

After all, Hughes told himself, there was a kind of fraternity among men. Just because *he* had never cheated on his wife, that didn't mean that he was a numerical majority. Each man's turn came in time. Niles was simply the hard-driving kind of guy who was not built for monogamy. Hughes was a different kind of people. But now Hughes, too, felt the itch to wander into new territory.

You could never go around wagging the finger-bone of scorn at other people, he thought. Because you never knew when you'd be tarred with the same brush. The best policy was just to sit tight, live your own life, and not worry too much about the way other people lived theirs. Only then there would be no gossip columns, no news photographers, and precious little conversation in the world, he decided wryly.

He let himself back into the apartment.

"Beth here yet?" Ellen asked.

"Nope. I left Tony down there sitting on the suitcases. He's going to ring the bell when she gets here. You all set?"

"Just about. I left you a big list of what to do. Water the plants, shut the windows when it

rains, stuff like that. Also instructions about what food is in the freezer."

He smiled. "I think I'll manage."

"Dave, why don't you come up for this weekend, after all? There'll be room in the car, and—"

"I told you, no. Look, Ellen, it'll be the middle of the afternoon before we get there, and then I'd have to take a bus back tomorrow—no, it isn't worth it. I'll come up with Mike next Friday."

"You won't forget to leave a note for the milkman on Monday?"

"I won't forget to leave a note for the milkman, no."

"Maybe I'd better—"

Hughes sighed. "Give me credit for a *little* intelligence, Ellen. Just a little. I'll remember."

She swept past him, on one final inventory of the apartment. Hughes was mildly annoyed at her calm assumption of his incompetence; after all, he had managed to survive as a bachelor for a goodly long time—until the age of twenty-five. He was out of practice in keeping house for himself, but not totally inexperienced.

Their daughter came toddling by. Erika was four and a half, just old enough to perceive that a major upheaval in domestic routine was taking place.

"Daddy going away?" she asked.

Hughes grinned. "No, pussycat. You've got it balled up. Daddy's staying here. *You're* going away."

"Forever?"

"Just till Labor Day."

"When that?"

"Eight weeks from now," Hughes said. Two

months. Sixty days. Then you and Mommie and Tony come home again."

"Why do we have to go away, if we're going to come back then?"

Chuckling, Hughes said, "Because you're going to someplace nice, where you can go swimming, and where it doesn't get so hot as it is here. And you'll have Cousin Larry to play with, and Baby Mindy—"

"What about you, Daddy?"

"I'll be there too. Not all the time. Just some of it. But I'll be there."

"When you—"

The question was cut off by the sudden, insistent ringing of the downstairs bell. Tony was just tall enough to reach the buzzer, this year, and he delighted in ringing the bell long and loud, whenever he was permitted to. Now he made the most of his opportunity.

Ellen snapped, "Why did you let him ring the bell? You know he always makes such a racket!"

"It's his last chance for two months," Hughes told her coldly. "Put your fingers in your ears if you can't stand it."

But the ringing stopped, after ten piercing squalls. Hughes glanced out a window. His sister's big, gleaming station wagon was parked out front, and Tony was greeting his cousins. Beth's boy was five, the girl two and a half. Tony would be very much the leader in the family, with his two-year advantage.

"You ready to go downstairs?" Hughes asked.

"Just about," Ellen said. She managed a smile. "See you Friday, then."

"Sure. On Friday. And I'll call every Monday and Thursday, just to keep tabs."

"You won't be lonely at home by yourself?"

"No lonelier than I've been lately," Hughes said with sudden brutality.

Ellen reddened. The thrust had gone home. "You didn't have to say that," she murmured. "You're always trying to spoil things."

"Let's not have a fight now. Beth's waiting downstairs."

Compulsively, Ellen made her umpteenth final check of the apartment. At last satisfied, she took Erika's hand and they all went out to the elevator.

When they arrived downstairs, Hughes discovered that his sister, in her brisk, efficient way, had already loaded the luggage into the wagon.

"Hello, Dave."

"Hi, Sis. Couldn't you wait for some help with the suitcases?"

"They weren't heavy," Beth said. "Well, all set?"

"All set," Ellen said.

Hughes nodded. His sister looked splendid, in skin-tight pedal-pushers and a striped polo shirt that accented the fullness of her bosom. She and Ellen looked almost like sisters, instead of sisters-in-law—two young mothers in slacks, both of them breasty and round-bottomed, with ponytails and bright eyes. Hughes wondered how far the resemblance went. Probably not as far as the bedroom, he decided. He didn't think Beth was cold in bed. He damned well *knew* that Ellen was.

Beth was getting behind the wheel. The kids

were all aboard. Ellen came up to him, kissed him lightly and without warmth.

"So long, Dave."

"Have a good time."

"You too, Dave. Don't get unhappy."

"I'll manage. See you Friday."

"Friday," she said.

She walked around to the other side, getting in beside Beth. Beth would have to drive the whole distance; Ellen had never learned how. The kids were waving—Tony and Erika enthusiastically, his nephew Larry with vague flapping motions, his niece Mindy with giggling imitative ones. Hughes waved back. The station wagon stuttered and came to life. It drove away.

Hughes stood outside the house for a moment, watching the retreating vehicle until it turned the corner. He felt strangely lightened. His wife and his children had driven off for the summer, and he was on his own.

Eight solid weeks of summertime bachelorhood now. *I ought to make the most of it*, he thought. *I'm not getting any younger or any handsomer.*

This would probably be the last chance he would get. Oh, there might be other summers when Ellen went away and left him behind, the way it was arranged this year. But he had the feeling that if he failed to make the jump this first opportunity, he never would. Next year he'd be thirty-five, and then he'd be thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, next thing you know forty—

And then fifty and then sixty, and nothing to show for it but a lot of missed opportunity.

No, he thought. It was now or never. He had a golden chance, and he was in the right frame of mind. He knew that if he muffed the moment, out of cowardice or laziness or a sudden uncontrollable attack of scruples, he'd never be in the same position again.

This is your chance, man. Your last chance for a fling before it's time to reach for the Serutan and settle down into staid old middle age. It's all up to you, Davey-boy. You can chicken out, or you can try for the brass ring. But just remember that it's now or never.

He strolled back into the lobby and punched the elevator button. The elevator rose, coming up from the basement, and when it arrived there was someone in it. She was about twenty-two or twenty-three, a blonde whose golden hair was done up in a plain bun today. She wore levis that tightly outlined the full, firm curves of her thighs and buttocks. She had a man's white shirt on, with the top button intentionally left open and the second button open too, probably not intentionally. Hughes could see the pale quivering tops of her breasts, meeting in a curving arch at the place where her collar-wings parted. She was a real blonde, he thought, with the milky, fantastically soft skin that goes with true blondeness.

He smiled politely. "Hello, Mrs. Keller. Getting the Sunday wash done a day early?"

She grinned selfconsciously, and color rose in her face. "The machine's always so crowded on Sundays, Mr. Hughes. I figured I'd get it done today."

"Any news from your husband?" he asked.

"I got a letter yesterday, thanks. He's still in California."

"He'll be out soon, though."

"Another six months," she said. "But he hopes maybe the army will release him early. He says they sometimes let you go after twenty-one months instead of twenty-four, if you have dependents and a good reason. So that would let him out in October instead of January."

The elevator reached the third floor. The girl bent over to pick up her bucket of wash; the front of her blouse fell open, exposing the creamy globes of her bosom to Hughes' glance. He felt a shiver of lust go rippling through his belly.

Holding the door open for her, he followed her out of the elevator. Her apartment was right across the hall from his. He smiled goodbye at her and let himself into his own now silent apartment.

He closed the door quietly behind him.

The silent apartment seemed weirdly extinguished, now that Ellen no longer rushed about in her endless anxiety for keeping the place spotless, now that the kids no longer wandered under foot with their toys and their crayons and their quarrels. Hughes walked into the livingroom and sat down heavily in his television chair.

He looked at his hands. They were shaking. He felt a cold sweat bursting out on his face and back.

The sight of those two soft, creamy breasts jiggling in that girl's blouse had had a powerful effect. Hughes scowled and clenched his fists. *Why didn't I think of that before,* he asked himself? *Of course. It's a natural. But—will she?*

He reviewed what he knew about the girl across the hall. Janice Keller was about twenty-two or so, he estimated. She had been married just under two years; Hughes remembered when the newlyweds had moved into the two-room apartment across the way. And about six months after they had moved in, Nick Keller had received his draft call. It had seemed like the end of the world to them, Hughes recalled. But he had gone, and Janice had managed to survive the separation, and for some reason she had not gone to live with him after he had finished basic training. He was stationed in San Francisco, and she remained here, holding down some sort of job. She did not seem too unhappy. She sometimes had visitors—male visitors—and it was possible to hear music and laughter coming from the apartment across the hall on a Saturday night.

And she was beautiful. No doubt of that.

Hughes undressed her in his mind, picturing that creamy white body with its two high swells of pink-tipped flesh, with the soft dimpled buttocks, the warm inviting thighs, the rounded belly so tender to the touch. He began to perspire again. He ***had*** to have her.

It would be revenge against Ellen, he thought. It was all Ellen's fault that he was so actively scheming to deceive her now. Ellen did not seem to understand that he was still young, still had a healthy man's healthy appetites. Over the years, Ellen had turned colder, until now it was a rare event when she turned willingly to him in bed at night.

It hadn't always been that way. Hughes could remember a different Ellen—the Ellen of ten years ago,

before their marriage, the exciting Ellen who had stripped off her clothes at a picnic in a secluded cove, who had made love with him out in the open, caring about nothing but the glory of the act. They had made love often and in many places, during the year of their engagement—in the back seat of his car, in parks, in Hughes' little bachelor flat, even on the sofa in Ellen's parents' home, while the old folks were out at the movies. And after the marriage, too, they had been happy in bed together.

Until Tony was born. Hughes dated the change in her from the day she found out she was pregnant. All during the pregnancy she kept trying to find excuses for not sleeping with him; she was nauseous, or she had migraine headaches, or she simply was afraid that too much jostling around would cause a miscarriage. And after coming home from the hospital there were new excuses. Hughes kept waiting for the old relationship to return, the relationship that might find her in bed and waiting for him before dinner when he came home from work. But it never did. They made love occasionally—as infrequently as Ellen could manage—but the spark was gone.

She tolerated him until it was certain that she was pregnant again, and then it was the same story over again. And for four years plus, now, it had been this way. Ellen was too bound up in her home, in her children, to have any energy left for her husband. They continued to make love, once or twice or sometimes three times a week, but only when the pressure inside Hughes was too great to be mastered, and he simply had to insist on his rights. But he suspected that, if he never insisted, Ellen would never think of sugges-

ting it.

And so now he hungered after the soft-breasted girl next door. He was on his own, for the first time, and it was his chance to get even in some way with Ellen.

I'll show her, he thought.

If I can't get it from her, I'll get it from Janice Keller. Young stuff is always juicier, anyway.

He turned on the television set. But his mind was not on the screen, but across the hall.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS A LONG DAY.

There was nothing on television at that hour of a Saturday morning except kiddiecrap, and after futilely twiddling the dials for a while Hughes gave up, shutting the set off with a snap. He found his newspaper and spent an hour methodically going down one column and up to the top of the page and down the next, and before he knew it it was lunchtime. He put together a bacon-lettuce-tomato sandwich for himself without any great difficulty, and, as Ellen had asked him to do, drank milk instead of coffee. There were two quarts of milk left in the refrigerator, and it would offend Ellen's sense of thrift to have them go to waste while the children were away. He drank milk, obediently.

It was a great temptation to leave the dishes where they were, but he fought it down. Sooner or later a day of reckoning would have to come in the kitchen, and it would be easier if he made sure that no accumulation of unwashed stuff piled up.

When he was through with the dishwashing chores, he strolled aimlessly around the apartment, wondering what he was going to do with himself on a Saturday afternoon in July. The temperature was climbing; it had been a pleasant 70 when the station wagon had departed, but now the thermometer outside the kitchen window read 88, and Hughes figured the mercury would hit 90 or 95 before the day was out. And this was just the beginning.

For one wild moment he toyed with the idea of going across to Janice Keller's and ringing the bell. Her apartment wasn't airconditioned either, and no doubt she would be sweating as much as he was. Maybe she would like to go to the beach with him. Or just take a drive. He tested a possible line, something about *here we are, you with your husband three thousand miles away and me with my wife and kids in the country, maybe we can work out some way of passing the time—*

A cold icicle of fear formed in the back of his throat. *She'll get sore. She'll slap me. She'll call the cops. Or worse, she'll just laugh. "Why, Mr. Hughes! Are you actually making a pass at lil ol me? At your age, too!"*

Hughes walked to the mirror. His familiar, unhandsome face looked glumly back at him. He was a tall man, six feet two, and broad through the shoulders and hips. He was muscular, but beginning to slow down and put on a little weight where he didn't especially want to have it. Most people considered him homely in an agreeable way, with his brown hair cropped close, his bushy eyebrows, his prominent, rounded nose, wide mouth, square blue-stubbled chin. It was a solid face, an unexceptional face.

To Janice Keller it was probably the face of a middle-aged man. *I'm twelve years older than she is. I was just getting pimples on my face when she was born. The day she entered kindergarten I was starting my senior year in high school. I probably had slept with half a dozen girls before she knew how to spell her own name.*

He smiled at the mirror image, and continued

the stream of thought he had embarked on. *I was dating my wife before Janice Keller began to menstruate. I was a married man before Janice was past the age of puberty. My son was born before Janice went on her first date. Janice was probably still a virgin when Erika was born. And here I am afraid to walk across the hall and ring her doorbell. Here I am panting like a horny teenager for one good squeeze of Janice Keller's big round boobs.*

Shaking his head slowly, Hughes walked away from the mirror. He told himself that it would be a mistake to begin his campaigning of adultery quite so speedily. Ellen was gone only two or three hours, now. It was in bad taste to cheat on your wife your very first day of freedom. Think about it for a while. Plan. Be patient, before reaping your harvest.

Yet once again the urge came to ring Janice's doorbell, and once again he beat it down. He went to the refrigerator and found a can of beer, and sipped it reflectively at the kitchen table.

He told himself, *Fundamentally, I'm scared. That's the real trouble. Scared she'll say no. Scared she'll tell Ellen. And also scared she may say yes.*

He closed his eyes, remembering.

It was close to eleven years since he had last slept with any woman but Ellen. Before Ellen there had been plenty of others; he had been an active bachelor, with an apartment of his own, and he never had too much trouble finding a compliant bed-partner.

He remembered the last one. Claudia, he thought. Claudia Rinehart. A tall mixed-up brunette with breasts like swollen melons. Hughes smiled, remember-

ing. Claudia went to Barnard; she was nineteen, he was twenty-three and had a good job. And Claudia lived to lay. She had probably laid her way through half of Columbia University before Hughes met her. He was two years out of CCNY and didn't have the Ivy League background she was used to; maybe that was why she liked him. He had laid her on their very first date, after a dance at Columbia; she had come up to his apartment, and she had folded her party gown up over her waist, and she had no underpants on underneath. It wasn't until the next time that he actually saw her naked body, all of it, with the heavy breasts looking so strangely white against the tan of the rest of her, the twin strips of white across her breasts and middle from the bikini that summer.

And then the final date, their tenth or twelfth: Claudia very drunk at a party, making him take her home early, then stripping for him and putting Latin-American music on. She did a wild, sensuous, drunken dance, her breasts swaying and bouncing, and rivulets of sweat running down her chest and back and thighs. And then she had fallen to the carpet with her legs spread, her arms outstretched, and he had loved her right there in her parents' expensive home. For half an hour his body had pressed down on hers, his tongue entrapped in her mouth, her legs imprisoning him. It was a memorable evening. Two days later, he met Ellen. He never called Claudia again.

Probably Claudia was a Long Island society matron now, with three kids and her own Mercedes-Benz and her own private psychoanalyst. And Hughes had not slept with anyone but Ellen, since. After five

dates with Ellen, she had gone willingly to bed with him—but Hughes had come to the realization that this girl was not just another lay, but promising material as a wife and mother, and so he had proposed to her in the morning. Ellen had been a virgin until the night before. She accepted his proposal without hesitating.

Eleven years go by. Engagement, marriage, parenthood. Somewhere, along the way, love gets lost. Marriage turns into kids and paying bills and planning to take a vacation in the summer.

And now infidelity, Hughes thought. *So far not real infidelity, just contemplated infidelity. A long way from being consummated. I'm out of the practice of seducing young women,* he thought. *My line is rusty.*

The telephone rang, jolting him out of his reverie. Hughes grabbed it on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Mike here, Dave," said his brother-in-law's deep, commanding voice. "I just got a call from Beth. The caravan arrived safely."

"So soon? It seems like they just left."

"It's almost two o'clock," Niles said. "The trip only takes two and a half hours up Route 17. Figure that they stopped to give the kids lunch, and it still works out."

"They have a good trip?"

"Beth said everything was okay. Also that they found the place in good shape. Ellen sends her love."

Hughes frowned. "That's nice."

Niles said, "What are you figuring on doing for the rest of the weekend, Dave?"

"Nothing much, I guess. Why?"

"Thought you might want to drop over here tonight. I'm having some friends. Strictly stag, but no dancing girls. And it's a pretty interesting bunch. Mack Correy—he had a script on *Playhouse* 90, you know—and Dan Wills and Nat Firestone—"

"Maybe I'd better not," Hughes said quickly. "I know your parties. I'll be roistering all night. I'd better get some rest instead."

"Hokay, man. Just thought I'd try for a nibble. So when are we going to get together? How about lunch on Monday? I'll be in the city, and I don't have any appointments."

"All right," Hughes said weakly.

"I'll phone your office around eleven Monday, then," Niles said. "Take it slow, kid."

"Yeah. You too."

Hughes hung up, scowling. He didn't like to be addressed as *kid* by a man four years his junior —even though that man might have an income four times as big as his. *Especially* because that man's income *was* four times as big as his.

He knew Niles didn't really want him to come to the party. He knew Niles thought of his brother-in-law as a pathetic kind of gink, a softy who didn't know which way was up. In Niles' book, anybody making less than $25,000 a year was ipso facto a gink. The world was Mike Niles' oyster, and he had scant sympathy for anyone else who lacked his knack for combing out pearls.

The party would have been rough going, anyway. Niles' friends were television people—writers, agents, actors, directors—all busy cutting the throats

of mutual enemies. The party would have been one long bloodletting—and it would have culminated in a drunken poker game for stakes Hughes couldn't begin to risk. Mike Niles thought nothing at all of dropping eight or nine hundred dollars between midnight and three in the morning. Hughes wasn't in that league at all.

Even for Niles, of course, the eight hundred represented a week's work, maybe. Five or six bloody days of pounding the typewriter and getting damfool calls from the script overseer, and of running into Manhattan for conferences and dressings-down and harangues. Oh, Mike Niles didn't get his money for no sweat at all, Hughes admitted.

But it was different, dropping a week's pay and dropping more than a month's. Besides, when Niles lost money he was losing it to his television buddies. In a way, that put him one up on them. When you take a pile of cash from a man, you feel guilty about it, subconsciously or otherwise. And so you try to make it up to him in some way. Niles could always figure, when he lost a stack of cash to some director or story editor, that he was making an investment that would pay dividends in fat assignments. Maybe, Hughes thought, Mike even took the losses off his income tax as "business expenses." That would be just like him, really.

Sudden curdling hatred for his brother-in-law pounded through Hughes' system. Niles always held all the aces. He always sounded smug, self-satisfied. And with reason. He had money, he had a successful career, he had a beautiful home, he had a beautiful wife. Mike Niles never had to worry about his

sex life. All through his marriage to Beth, he had made that abundantly clear.

Hughes had come close to poking him a couple of times. There was the time, a year or two after the wedding, when Niles had been in his cups and boasted to Hughes: "Christ, man, your sister's the hottest thing on two legs, you know? We got it down to a routine. All I do is touch her tits, any hour of the day or night. Just a touch, a little squeeze. Off come the clothes, down she plops on the bed. And she goes like a rabbit, too. Comes every time."

Hughes had been disgusted. It was nice that Beth had a satisfactory sex life, but there was something filthy about the way her husband boasted about it to her brother. Every man thinks of his younger sister as a virgin until long after abundant proof to the contrary exists. Hughes resented having anecdotes of his sister's accessibility retailed to him as though Niles were describing some cooperative starlet looking for a role.

Okay, he thought. *So Niles' wife is a good lay. Hurray for him. Hurray for Beth. Ellen used to be good too, once.*

Then:

I bet Janice Keller is good in bed too.

Suddenly he was trembling with desire again. The temperature in the apartment seemed to be at least a hundred twenty. His sweat-soggy clothes clung damply to his moist skin. Without conscious volition he moved toward the door of the apartment. *I'll show Mike Niles,* he thought. I'll show Ellen. *I'll show the whole goddam world.*

He stepped across the hall and rang Janice Keller's doorbell.

He heard footsteps within, and fought back the desire to flee into his own apartment.

"Who's there?"

"Dave Hughes," he said hoarsely. "From across the hall."

She flicked open the peephole as if to confirm this, and then opened the door and looked out doubtfully at him, smiling in an uncertain way. She was wearing Bermuda shorts and a white tee-shirt, and the humidity had pasted the tee-shirt to her skin with sweat. Whether she knew it or not, it was practically transparent, and she had no bra on underneath. Hughes could make out plainly the round, pink swells of her breasts, and he could see the little lumps that were her nipples. His face reddened and he felt slightly dizzy, looking down at her. Her blonde hair tumbled in delightful disarray around her shoulders.

She continued to smile at him, as though wondering what he wanted.

He said, "I hope I'm not disturbing you—"

"Oh, no, not at all."

"It's just that—well—you know, my wife and children went away for the summer this morning—"

"Yes, Mrs. Hughes was telling me yesterday."

Hughes fished for something plausible. "Well—you see, I'm sort of forced back on my own resources, and it's been a long time. I thought I'd clean the place up, but I can't seem to figure out how the vacuum cleaner works, and I thought maybe you had the same kind and could show me.

There's a do-jigger in the back where the dirt's collected, and—"

He knew how to run the vacuum cleaner perfectly well. But it was the first notion that popped into his head, as he stood in the hallway trying not to notice the pulse-pounding thrust of Janice Keller's pink breasts beneath the tightly-drawn fabric of her tee-shirt. He could make out without any doubt at all the darker circles of her nipples, and the round masses of her breasts. His fingers tightened as he pictured himself cupping those full, heavy breasts in his hands.

More. He pictured her lifting the tee-shirt from her. It was sweat-sticky, and it would come away from her skin with a little popping sound, and he would draw it over her head and drop it to the floor. And then he would kneel and delicately touch her nipples with his tongue, and bury his face in the valley between those two delectable mountains of flesh.

And then—the image unfolded spontaneously, in one quick flash of lust unreeled across the screen of his mind—and then he would open the little buckle on the Bermuda shorts and find the zipper and slide it down, and pull the shorts off her. Maybe she would have panties on underneath, maybe not. But he would get her naked, and magically his own clothes would disappear, and she would draw him down on top of her and her warm thighs would encircle his body and she would look up at him out of eyes liquid with desire, and in one quick breathtaking thrust their bodies would join and he would go rocking off to the land of delight.

The image faded guiltily.

Janice said, "I'd be glad to. Just let me get my hair fixed and I'll come right across."

Hughes thanked her and ducked back into his own apartment. Quickly he got the vacuum cleaner out of the closet, plugged it in, and opened up the back, making it seem as though he had been tinkering with it in absolute non-comprehension. A moment or two passed, and then the doorbell rang.

Janice had gathered up her hair and rubber-banded it into a pony-tail. She had also, Hughes noticed ruefully, put on a bra. Probably she had caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and had decided it was indecent to go into a man's apartment dressed so revealingly. There was color in her cheeks, too, indicating excitement at the idea that the strange man might have seen more of her than she had known she was revealing.

She knelt and demonstrated the use of the vacuum cleaner in a few brisk motions.

"Thanks," Hughes said. "You know, I'm going to have a rough time being a bachelor all this summer. I didn't realize how dependent I've become on Ellen."

"Can you cook?"

"Not very well," he lied. "I guess I'll have to eat in restaurants all summer, unless I want to risk giving myself ptomaine poisoning."

She smiled shyly. "I could make dinner for you if you liked, Mr. Hughes. I mean, don't get me wrong—it's just that it's a shame, you having to eat out all summer, when the two of us live right across the hall. I'm a pretty good cook, Mr.

Hughes."

"I'm sure you are. And won't you call me Dave? Neighbors don't have to be so formal—Janice."

"You wouldn't think there was anything wrong with the arrangement, if we had dinner together some nights?" she asked. "I mean, with Nick in the army and your wife away for the summer, it would just be logical that we could sort of cooperate to keep each other from getting too lonely. I know I get awful lonely, Mr. Hughes—*Dave*. And I bet you must miss your wife tremendously already."

Hughes nodded gravely. "Indeed I do."

She smiled. "Maybe tonight, then—"

Suddenly buoyant, he seized the initiative. "Tonight's fine. Only it's too hot for a girl like you to have to fuss with cooking tonight. Look, suppose I take you to a restaurant tonight—"

"Oh, no, Dave." *Was that a gleam of suspicion in her eyes,* Hughes wondered?

"Honest, my intentions are pure. I figure if you're going to cook for me this summer, we ought to start the arrangement off in a festive way. Let's you and me go out for dinner, Janice. I wouldn't think of letting you cook in ninety-degree weather."

"Well—"

"Come on, live dangerously!" he urged. "I'm just an old married man trying to stave off loneliness. I guarantee not to eat you alive."

"You're *not* old!"

"I'm ancient. I'm thirty-four."

"What's so old about that?"

"Plenty. How old are you, anyway?"

She reddened. "Twenty-two, almost twenty-

three. But you mustn't think you're old, Dave."

"If you say so, I feel younger already. Is it a date for tonight, Mrs. Keller?"

"I suppose, Mr. Hughes. Only—"

"What?"

"Let's make it dutch treat."

"Unthinkable!"

"But that way I wouldn't feel so guilty about it," she said.

Hughes glowered at her. "Dinner is on me tonight. I insist. There will be no further discussion of the matter."

She giggled. "You're funny."

"Like a crutch. Are you quick getting ready for dinner, or are you like my wife?"

"Well, I'd want to take a shower first, and set my hair—but we have plenty of time, don't we? It's only two-thirty now."

Hughes nodded. "You go fix yourself up. I'll ring your bell around five. The quicker we get into some good and air-conditioned restaurant, the better."

She left. Hughes watched the way her trim rear wiggled as she walked to the door. The moment it closed behind her, he nearly gave a whoop of joy.

It had all worked out perfectly. What was it she had said? *With Nick in the army and your wife away for the summer, it would just be logical that we could sort of cooperate to keep each other from getting too lonely.*

Cooperation was just what Hughes wanted. The girl was a little on the naive side, he thought, and probably she had no inkling of exactly how

much cooperation he was hoping to exact from her. But she had a body, and she was obviously lonely, and the combination added up to good possibilities. Everything was on his side. Living ten feet from each other, in the relative privacy of an apartment house where few people knew any of their neighbors very well, and both alone, both lonely. The summer heat might help him too, he thought. And gradually they would become more friendly, as her fear of the strange man from across the hall receded, and one day soon he would put his hand to her body and she would not remove it, and he would possess her.

He pictured her nude again, nipples standing up stiffly on the quivering mounds of her breasts. Desire tightened his throat like a noose. He peeled off his clothes and headed for the shower. For the first time in years, he felt delight in his masculinity. For the first time in years, he felt really glad to be alive.

CHAPTER THREE

AT FIVE MINUTES TO FIVE that afternoon, Hughes went across the hall and rang Janice Keller's bell. He was dressed in a light cord summer suit, a sport shirt, no tie. He was meticulously shaven, and had even put on a few drops of his aftershave cologne. He felt absurdly like a teenager showing up at his girl's house for a Very Important Date.

"Coming!" Janice called.

She opened the door. "I'm just about ready. Come in, won't you?"

He was a bit surprised at the way she was dressed. She wore a white dress, so tight it hugged the full curves of her hips like a glove. It was extremely low-cut, and the creamy globes of her breasts rose from it like twin peaks, with a long inviting cleft between them. Hughes was certain she had put a dab of perfume between her breasts: a dizzying aroma wandered up from them. She had decorated her eyelids with dark shadow, and her hair was pulled back in an elaborate coiffure. In every way, it seemed as though she had been primping for the date all afternoon.

Maybe it's important to her too, he thought. *More important than I suspected.*

He took a seat in the livingroom-cum-diningroom of the tiny apartment, while Janice busied herself with some mysterious final grooming in the bedroom. While waiting, he glanced around. The furniture was meager, though what there was was

in fairly good taste, as cheap furniture went. A long low modern couch, two butterfly chairs, a tiny scrap of rug. A portable phonograph mounted on a small table. A record rack with perhaps twenty or thirty long-playing records in it, and a thick stack of 45s. A two-shelf bookshelf that contained about forty well-worn paperback books. Most of them were mysteries or science fiction, but Hughes was more than a little surprised to see a book on Freud, one called *Understanding Great Music,* and Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma.* The three serious books all appeared to have been read several times. Hughes wondered if they were the property of Nick Keller, or if Janice were trying to improve on whatever skimpy education she had previously had.

He took the Stendhal out of the bookcase and leafed idly through it. A moment later, Janice appeared, having thrown a white jacket over her shoulders to mitigate the startling decolletage of her dress.

He held the book up. "This is one of my favorite novels. Have you ever read it?"

"Twice," she said. "The first time I didn't understand it much, but I think it's great, now. Did you go to college, Dave?"

"CCNY. I majored in business administration, minored in literature."

"You must have read everything worthwhile, then. I wish I had gone to college. Now that I'm all alone here, I do a lot of serious reading. But so much of it puzzles me, you know? Because I can't *relate* any of it. That's it. I can't *relate.*"

Hughes smiled. "Let's go relate ourselves to

some dinner, first of all. I'm famished."

He held the door open for her, and they swept out into the hall. She locked up while he was ringing for the elevator.

On the way down she said, "I've just started reading Freud now. All about sex, and everything. He's tremendously interesting.

"All I saw was the one book *about* Freud."

"Oh, I keep the others in my bedroom." She giggled. "I guess you'll have to have designs on my virtue if you want to know what sort of books I have. The Freud book I was just reading was a kind of introduction to psychoanalysis, a pocketbook thing. Have you ever been psychoanalyzed, Dave?"

"Me? No, that's one sport I can't afford. My brother-in-law was in analysis for six months a couple of years ago. $25 an hour, five hours a week. He gave it up because he decided the analyst was crazier than he was."

Janice giggled. "Oh, he wasn't serious! It must have really been because he couldn't afford it."

"He *can* afford it, though. Mike can afford anything. He's a television writer. Some comedy program."

"Oh," Janice said, obviously impressed.

There was a sour taste in Hughes' mouth as he envisioned what would happen if a girl like Janice ever fell into Mike Niles' clutches. He would give her the big line about his television writing, and how he hobnobbed with all the stars and famous personalities, and he would flash the bankroll. Niles always carried hundreds of dollars in cash, just for that purpose.

And then Janice would simply melt away. She would fall down stunned by the magnificence of the self-appointed god, and Niles would just reach out and pluck the clothes off her and do what he wanted with her. And after it was all over, Niles would pat her fondly on her shapely rear and send her away, convincing her that she had had an unforgettable experience by being allowed to make love to the great Mike Niles.

Niles wouldn't have hesitated a moment. And neither would Janice. Inside of ten minutes, Hughes thought, Niles could get almost any impressionable female's clothes off, no matter who her husband was or how she felt about him.

They left the house and walked around the corner to the place where Hughes had left the car. The apartment house had its own garage, but the tab was $15 a month, and Hughes preferred to take his chances finding a parking spot in the street. Sometimes it meant riding round and round for half an hour or more, but the savings was worth it. Raising two kids on $8300 a year wasn't the easiest thing in the world, if you also happened to like good food and books and shows.

The car was a '54 Plymouth, beginning to show serious signs of age now. Hughes kept it spotless, but no amount of elbow grease could disguise an ailing engine. Janice slipped in easily beside him. He felt a strange thrill at having a strange woman in the front seat with him. For a moment he seemed to be driving, not the Plymouth of his married life, but the '46 Buick he had owned during his early twenties, his bachelor year. Many a maid's honor

had been yielded on the back seat of that battered old Roadmaster, he thought. Many a firm young bosom quivered to the touch of his groping hand. Many a pair of soft white thighs parted for the few minutes of writhing and belly-pushing that we dignify with the name of "the act of love."

Hughes' mind roved backward in time, back to his bachelor days, and he thought about the girls that there had been before Ellen, the girls that he had made love to in that old Buick. Claudia, of course. And Marie, the thin girl from Hunter College with the pimply face and the thin pale lips and the unexpectedly large breasts ballooning from her chest. Marie was a French Literature major, and had a funny way of quoting Racine or Moliere just when he wanted to be passionate. Hughes remembered. But she had come across twice for him, and he suspected—though he was not certain of it—that he had had her virginity from her.

The others came in mind now, forgotten phantoms of the past. The girl who was just getting over a broken engagement—what was her name, he wondered? Katherine? Kate? Something like that. *Kay,* maybe. He could not visualize her face at all, except that he remembered she had a weak chin and a slightly bucktoothed smile. She had been long and lean, with a model's figure, small breasts and long neck, and though she had been eager for sex she was totally incapable of enjoying it. Hughes had dropped her after three or four dates, because it was a kind of humiliation to him to collide with the stone wall of her frigidity every time they embraced. He suspected he knew why the engagement

had been broken.

And Sue, he thought—today she would probably be called a beatnik, but back then she was merely bohemian. A short, slender girl with big serious eyes and long black hair that hung down straight. She was the one, he remembered now, who had the thing about her breasts. She didn't mind his looking at them when she was undressed, but he wasn't allowed to touch. They were hypersensitive or something, she said, and bruised easily. So he had kept hands off, and filled her up with cheap chianti in the Greenwich Village bistros, and had made love to her in a curious arm's-length sort of way.

Phantom after phantom bobbed out of the past. And then Ellen, blotting them all away, Ellen who had been his only love for so long.

And now Janice at his side.

Janice . . .

"Where are we going?" Janice asked.

"Don's. It's a steak house in Glen Cove. Fiercely cold in summertime. Good food, too. I often go there with my—"

With my wife.

Better keep her out of the conversation.

"—with friends," he finished lamely.

It was a good restaurant, and a big one. No chance that the maitre'd would recognize him and then frown knowingly at his bosomy young companion. And it was out away from the neighborhood, too. Little possibility of running into neighbors or friends.

Hughes drove buoyantly, almost convincing

himself he was piloting a brand-new Cadillac instead of a stuttering old Plymouth. He reached the restaurant in what was probably record time for the distance. Leaving the car in the restaurant's parking lot, they went in. As always, the place was glacially cold—but after the furnace heat that prevailed outside, it would have been ungrateful to complain.

"Two," he told the headwaiter.

They were conducted to a table at the side, nestled away in a secluded booth. The location couldn't have been more ideal if Hughes had requested it and backed the request with a fivespot; he wondered if the maitre'd had not recognized him after all, and, knowing that he was here with a woman not his wife, had tactfully conveyed him to an isolated booth.

Janice's face glowed as she opened the immense menu. "Golly! How do you know what to pick first!"

"You could begin by picking a cocktail first," Hughes said. "How about a nice chilly martini?"

"That sounds fine. I like martinis, I think."

"You *think?*"

"Well, I don't have them too often," she explained. "It's not the sort of thing I'd normally drink."

Hughes smiled and gave the order. He was beginning to form a mental picture of what this girl was like: enormously beautiful, but naive and actually ignorant—though willing to learn. A girl with a high school education, and probably not a very good one at that, who, marrying at the age of nineteen, had had no time to ripen into real matur-

ity—and who, living the disjointed life of a married woman separated by thousands of miles from her husband, had had no further opportunities to mature.

The martinis arrived. They were perfect: ice cold, strong, crisp. Janice grinned shyly as she drank hers. The effect seemed to be immediate: on the third sip, she began to unbutton her jacket. Tempting white flesh gleamed through the opening in the white fabric.

"Want me to hang that up for you?" he asked.

"Please. Yes."

"Sure you won't be cold?"

"I'm getting used to the temperature in here."

He hung her jacket up. She sat leaning forward, holding the drink, her shoulders hunched together. The front of her dress puckered outward, giving Hughes a good view of her breasts. He could see the restraining band of cloth across her nipples, supporting her breasts and thrusting them upward. His blood pressure began to rise.

As she finished the martini, Hughes signalled quietly to the waiter, who set off for two more. Janice looked surprised when the refills arrived.

"We didn't order more, did we?"

"I did."

"But I'll get drunk, Dave! I'm getting drunk already!"

He grinned. "Don't be silly. One whiff of steak and you'll sober up. Here." He clinked his glass against hers.

"I'm not sure I ought to," she began doubtfully.

"We can't waste it. And if I drink both of them, I'll be too potted to drive home. Come on!"

She made an okay-be-a-good-sport face and went to work on the martini. Watching her, Hughes felt like a heel. *She's just a kid, and here I am busy greasing her up with joy-juice so her panties will slip off easier. I ought to be shot for this. I ought to be taken out and shot like a dog. I deserve to be lynched.*

She was growing very gay; her face was flushed, her eyes a little glassy. Finishing her drink, she picked up the enormous menu and began to prowl through it again, muttering, "Now, what on Earth am I going to have?"

"What about filet mignon?" Hughes suggested.

"I don't know. I've never had it."

"*Never?* But—"

"It's so expensive, that's why. What's it like?"

"Well, it's sort of a thick square piece of meat, so tender you can't believe it. No fat, no bones, just meat, pink on the inside, and they charcoal-broil it on the outside—"

"Mmm. Sounds good." She found it on the menu. "But it's five-fifty, Dave! That's much too much!"

It was, Hughes admitted. He would be eating hot dogs for a week to balance the budget. And, too late, he remembered the lunch date with Mike on Monday. That was bound to be expensive. Still, call it an investment. The whole meal today would cost him less than twenty dollars. And if a twenty-buck investment paid off in dividends of tender satiny breasts and bedroom thighs, it would be worth it.

He called the waiter over.

"The filet mignon dinner for both of us," he said. "Make them both medium rare. Shrimp cocktails first, and—oh, a half bottle of California claret to go with the meat."

The waiter nodded and glided away. Ordinarily, Hughes might have ordered burgundy or bordeaux—but Janice was not likely to be a wine connoisseur, and ordering California wine peeled a dollar off the eventual check. There were limits even to splurging.

The shrimps were excellent, the filet superb. Hughes kept pouring the wine. Janice ate appreciatively, obviously enjoying this meal the way she had never enjoyed a meal before in her life.

"What sort of job do you have?" she wanted to know.

"I'm comptroller of a lithography firm," Hughes said. "That's a fancy title meaning glorified bookkeeper. I oversee the accounts, make up the payrolls, check the work of the bookkeepers under me. Very dull work."

"Is that what you wanted to do?"

He shrugged. "I don't remember when I last *wanted* to do anything. I guess I wanted to be a novelist or a playwright or some vague thing like that. Only trouble with me was I never wrote anything. So I wised up and took a Business Administration course. It's not the worst job in the world, only it's uninspiring. What do you do?"

"Right now I'm a clerk in a bookstore near the Kew Gardens subway station."

"I think I know the place. Greeting cards, lending library, paperbacks, a few records?"

"That's the one. I can buy anything I want at wholesale, you see. So the job really pays a little more than I get on my paycheck. I bought most of my records there. And it's nice work. I like being around books. I never read much until last year, and now I'm trying to make up for all the time I wasted with movies and television. But there's so much. All the old Greeks, and Shakespeare, and Shaw, and everybody—"

Hughes tried to picture this busty young blonde reading Aeschylus, and almost coughed up a chunk of steak. *But you have to give her credit for trying,* he thought. *She's trying to make something out of herself. She doesn't want to go through life being known just as a dumb blonde with big tits.*

As the wine took hold of her, she became more and more voluble about her intellectual aspirations. Hughes began to perceive one additional and useful fact about her: she regarded him as a highly educated man, a sage who had all of the best ideas of Socrates and Kant at his fingertips. *I'm a kind of father image for her,* he thought. *A flowing fount of wisdom and all that. Well, we'll soon see just how strong her Electra complex really is.*

He resisted the temptation to order cognac with their coffee. It would have been just the ideal finishing touch to the meal—but, he considered, it would add another two dollars to the bill, and, in any event, Janice was probably as drunk as she needed to be. They sipped their coffee with the calm satisfaction of people who had been well fed.

"I think that's the best meal I've ever had in my life," Janice told him. "But you really shouldn't

have gone to all that expense, Dave."

"It was worth it to make you happy. Think of you, twenty-two years old and never having tasted filet mignon! At least that gap in your education has now been remedied."

She giggled again. "You're funny. So serious, sometimes. I like you."

"I like you too," he told her solemnly.

It had been an odd conversation. Never once had either of them mentioned either Nick or Ellen. It was as though there had been a tacit agreement between them not to say a word about the absent mates. Out of sight, out of mind.

The check arrived. $18.70—more than he usually spent on Ellen on their anniversary dinner. He tried to be casual about it as he took two tens and a single from his wallet and deposited them in the tray. $21, he thought, would take care of the tip and everything. He took Janice's jacket from the hook and slipped it around her shoulders. His trembling fingers brushed the bare skin of her arms as he did so. An uncontrollable shiver of excitement ran through his body at the touch of her incredibly velvety skin.

They got into the car. Janice sat closer to him than she had on the way out; he could feel the warmth of her thigh against his, through her dress, through his trousers. He drove carefully: with two martinis and some wine in him, he was extra cautious. It would be unpleasant for the two of them to get into some sort of accident together—more unpleasant if they survived the accident and had to explain what they were doing.

The heat had slackened some, but the temperature was still in the mid-eighties, and it was humid. After the frigidity of the restaurant, the contrast was even more marked as they returned to the natural climate. Janice turned the car radio on as they drove, tuning in some disk-jockey's rock-and-roll program. She leaned back, her head dangling over the seat, soaking in the music.

Luck was with him. He found a parking spot right in front of the house—something usually impossible to do on a Saturday night. They went into the lobby and rang for the elevator. Janice was still showing the effects of the martinis, even though they were two hours in the past; she was having a little trouble walking straight. Hughes prayed that they would meet no neighbors on the way up. It would look very suspicious, the two of them together, dressed up for the evening, both of them smelling like distilleries, Janice obviously three sheets to the wind—

Luck held. They met no one.

Leaving the elevator on the third floor, Hughes hesitated. This was the crucial moment, the moment when he cinched the evening by drastic action. But she took the initiative away from him.

"I want to dance, now. Let's go into my place and dance for a while, Dave."

He forced himself not to yelp in triumph. "That's fine, very fine with me."

"And why don't we have some more drinks? Do you know how to make martinis?"

"Of course."

"Okay, then. You make martinis and we'll

dance."

They went into his apartment first, and he opened the sideboard, taking out the gin, the big bottle of vermouth, and the cocktail shaker.

"You have ice-cubes?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Then we're all set."

Carrying the bottles, they crossed over into her apartment. Hughes felt giddy, not so much from the drinking he had done as from the teetering sensation of being on the brink of fabulous success.

Janice put a record on. Dance music, rhumbas played by some Latin-American orchestra.

"I'll make up a whole shaker of martinis," he said. "Then we can keep them in the icebox and have them whenever we want them during the evening."

"Let me watch. I want to know how."

He opened the bottles while she brought a tray of icecubes in.

"The important thing," he said as though delivering a lecture, "is the proportion. Me, I prefer about four parts of gin to one of vermouth. The cocktail shaker is calibrated, thusly. So for six martinis we want, oh, fifteen ounces of gin, like so. And just under four ounces of vermouth. Now we toss in some ice, not very much, and stir the whole thing around. Want one now?"

"Let's wait a little while. I want to dance first, Dave."

"Okay. Put the shaker in the refrigerator. They'll be ready whenever we are."

She disappeared into the miniscule kitchen.

While she was gone, Hughes slipped out of his jacket and hung it up. She had already taken hers off. When she returned, she kicked off her shoes and danced up to him. She was middling tall, five four or so.

"Let me get my clodhoppers off," Hughes said. "I'm less likely to mess up your toes this way."

He took his shoes off, cutting the height differential between them.

They began to dance.

He had been a good dancer once, but in recent years had let himself get out of practice. Janice moved well, gaily, with no trace of martini-induced clumsiness. The visible flesh of her breasts quivered enticingly as she danced. They began stylishly at arm's length, but rapidly drew nearer, until they were dancing body to body. He felt the pressure of her breasts, twin cones boring into the lower part of his chest, and it seemed to him he was able to detect the little hard knobs that were her nipples. Her thighs were against his, her belly flat against his loins.

They moved rhythmically, back and forth, body against body. Hughes felt the fire start to mount. His hand, which had been round the girl's shoulders. now slipped lower, to her waist, and, a few minutes later, to the upper curve of her buttocks.

She was not wearing any sort of corset, thank goodness, Hughes discovered. He felt the firm but fluid flesh beneath his hand. She did not attempt to remove the hand. Rather, she gave her hips a comic little wiggle, rubbing both cheeks past his hand. They laughed.

Then, suddenly, they were even tighter together. He lowered his cheek to touch hers. The skin was fantastically satiny. For a moment they remained that way; then, easily, he brought his head around and put his lips to hers.

It was like the closing of an electrical circuit.

He looked deep into her eyes, and saw strange things there—fear, guilt, astonishment, but above all else lust. Desire. Then her eyes were closed, and she was kissing him with her breasts and thighs and loins, and her tongue darted into his mouth like a little bird of fire, and for a long instant they remained in stasis, his hands squeezing the tender flesh of her buttocks while she stood on tiptoe and writhed her body into his.

The music stopped.

Silence filled the room.

She gently broke away from him. She was flushing red, down to the hemispheres of her breasts. Her eyes were slits.

She said hoarsely, "Get the drinks out of the fridge, Dave. I need one."

CHAPTER FOUR

HUGHES SCOWLED AT THE INTERRUPTION to the orderly progression of physical intimacy, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Even long-play records came to an end eventually. He went into the kitchen and got the cocktail shaker from the refrigerator, while from the other room came the sound of a new record.

"Where are the glasses?" he called.

"In the cupboard," Janice told him. "Over the sink."

He found two glasses—ordinary drinking glasses: there did not seem to be any stemware—and poured out two hefty martinis. Replacing the shaker in the fridge, he went back into the livingroom. Janice was dancing alone, moving rhythmically about. She looked excited and worried at the same time.

"Drink hearty," he told her.

They clinked glasses. She drank the icy martini down with fierce rapidity—as if, Hughes thought, she were trying to anesthetize her conscience as fast as possible. He sipped his drink, finishing no more than half of it by the time Janice's glass was drained. She seemed to wobble a little as she came toward him.

"Let's dance some more," she said a little thickly.

He put his unfinished drink down and let her glide into his arms. The music was slower, more passionate now, and they moved back and forth

across the room in steady waves, body to body. His hands roved down her back to the springy firmness of her buttocks. Her breasts ground into his chest. Once again their lips met, and this time there were no interruptions. She clung to him, eyes closed, as his tongue explored her mouth.

He found a zipper between her shoulderblades and drew it gently down. The dress opened as far as the middle of her back, where the swelling hillocks of her buttocks began to thrust out. He slipped his hand under the dress, against her skin, and his fingers travelled down the velvet of her back, finding the elastic waistband of her panties and going under it to touch the taut, round, satiny sleekness of her buttocks. She pulled her lips from his and gave a little sign of yearning, and he felt her body quiver. He let one hand retrace the passage up her back, finding the place where her bra was fastened, and he groped with the fastening.

But it was an unusual kind of hook, and to his annoyance he was not able to open it with one hand.

"Don't," she murmured. "You'll break it. Let me do it, Dave."

"Okay."

She stepped back, away from him, and suddenly yanked the dress up over her head. Hughes' heart pounded furiously. Her bra was a half-cup kind that cradled her breasts, lifting them upward and leaving them largely bare. She wore a garter-belt that supported sleek nylons, and a pair of filmy panties. Her face was strangely pale now, with no lingering remnant of the flush of alcohol.

She's a scared little kid, Hughes thought. *She*

can't control what she's doing, and it frightens the hell out of her. But Christ, she's gorgeous.

Her hands went around behind her back, performing some mysterious maneuver, and abruptly the taut bra went slack and dropped away. Her breasts tumbled free. They were magnificent, great globular mounds of soft flesh, breathtakingly white. Like angry little eyes, the pink nipples rose at him, fiercely erect.

Wonderstruck, he drank in the beauty of her breasts from halfway across the room. Then, unexpectedly, color came to her face, and spread like a crimson wave down to bring red blotches to the swells of her breasts. She turned and dashed into the bedroom, closing the door loudly behind her.

Hughes frowned. Had she changed her mind? Had she suddenly come to her senses?

Perhaps she would barricade herself in there, he thought. Perhaps she was suddenly frightened of what she was doing, and—just a scared little girl, really, for all her woman's love-flesh—she would hide in there, whimpering at him, telling him to go away.

He felt the stiff thrust of desire in him, and knew he might get out of control if she denied him. He had to have her, now. He could not answer for the consequences if she had just been playing a tease act. His knees felt shaky. Sweat drenched him. What was she doing in there?

The door was shut tight. Frowning, Hughes wondered what was going on.

"Janice?" he called. "Janice?"

There was no answer. He called again, louder.

"Hey, Jan! What's going on?"

"Wait a minute," she called back.

"I want to come in. I'm coming in," he told her. "Okay?"

He walked to the bedroom door.

"Don't come in yet," she called. "Not yet. Okay, now."

He opened the door, not knowing what to expect.

She lay on the bed, propped up on one elbow, nude. The panties and stockings and garter-belt had been tossed into a heap on the floor.

"I didn't want you to see me undress any more," she giggled. "I was ashamed."

"Christ," he muttered. "Christ everlasting, but you're beautiful!"

She was. From the golden glory of her hair past the blue-eyed innocence of her face to the awesome rise of her breasts, she was lovely. His gaze went on down, to the gentle roundness of her belly, to the delicate cloud at her loins, to the pale flawlessness of her thighs, streaked ever so faintly with blue veins beneath the milky skin.

She held out her arms to him. Her breasts, swaying with her gesture, drew him like magnets.

"Dave—"

"Yes, Jan! Yes, yes, yes!"

He advanced toward the bed, stripping off his clothes as he came, ripping them feverishly from his body. He felt an excitement he had not known in a decade. There she was, waiting for him, arms outspread, nipples stiff and eager, body soft, warm, opening to him.

She pulled him down on top of her. Her finger-

nails dug deep into his back. Her pistoning legs wrapped themselves around his buttocks. He touched her breasts, then slid his hands under her and down to her hips, to her full soft buttocks, and she gasped and let him take her. There were no preliminaries, no vestiges of love-play. All the preliminaries had come long before. They were both fully aroused, both ready to move directly on to the thundering climax.

Her body moved convulsively beneath his. Her breasts flattened themselves against his body. He heard her sighing, moaning, whimpering. He looked down at her face, saw her eyes screwed tight shut, the mouth open, lips slack and moist. She was panting, trying to catch her breath as the successive waves of ecstacy swept over her.

He wanted to make it last forever. But his body betrayed him, and he felt the unmasterable climax coming upon him, and upon her too. She cried out, hoarsely, almost an animal cry, and he felt sweat burst out all over his body, and he opened his eyes to see the shiny globulets of perspiration on her breasts, and then she pulled him down, crushing him against her, and cried out, "Everything, Dave, everything right now!"

It was everything.

It was like the pounding of a triphammer, and then silence, and it was all over.

The moment it was done, he thought of Ellen. The image came into his mind like a canker into an apple: Ellen, somewhere miles and miles away, in a cottage with Beth and the kids. No more than twelve hours had passed since Ellen's departure.

And here he was, his naked body flattening the clinging nakedness of this unbelievably lovely child, this stranger.

He rolled his weight off her, and for a long time they remained side by side, not speaking. Hughes felt exhausted by the savage intensity of the act they had performed.

He had to fight to keep from falling asleep. That was what he wanted to do, now: curl up with his face against the soft warmth of those big breasts, push his nose between those firm round hills of flesh, and drop off into bottomless sleep. But he knew that would be wrong. *She* would not sleep, but would merely come to regret.

It was done now, and there was no turning back from the deed, no denying it, no canceling-out of what had taken place. He had conceived the desire to commit adultery, and—almost at once, it seemed—his desire had been fulfilled.

There was no changing anything now. No future turn of events could ever make him a not-adulterer. He had chosen his path, and now he was irrevocably embarked upon it. He heard her gentle breathing near his ear, and touched her breasts as if to convince himself once again that this was real, that it was not all some fantasy of his tormented mind.

It was real.

The girl lay there, nude, pink-breasted, golden and lovely. The imprints of his fingers still reddened the flesh of her body. Her sweat had mingled with his sweat, her body had contained his.

There was no going back now.

Perhaps ten minutes went by. Then Janice swung herself without warning off the bed and padded across the floor into the bathroom. Alert, Hughes listened, heard water running. She came back into the bedroom, taking a robe from the closet and wrapping it tightly around her.

In a low, muffled voice she said, "Please get dressed, Dave."

"Janice, we—"

"Put your clothes on, Dave. You're—embarrassing me this way."

Shrugging, he found his briefs and slipped into them. Then he looked up, and saw her beginning to shake, saw the tears in her eyes.

"Janice."

She shook her head. "Why did we do it? *Why?* It was like—like insanity!"

"It was the most wonderful moment I've ever had."

"No, Dave. It was something filthy. Your wife was away, and Nick was away, and we saw our chance and we grabbed it. Like little kids raiding the bubblegum box the moment mother isn't looking."

He took her hands in his. Her hands felt cold now. "Janice, listen to me. It was something that, well, just happened. We were both lonely. We needed each other. And we gave each other what we needed."

"We're married. Not to each other. And we grabbed a dirty little half hour of sweaty pleasure."

"Didn't you enjoy it, Jan?"

She lifted her head and looked into his eyes, and he saw the torment in hers. "Yes," she whisper-

ed. "Yes, I enjoyed it! More than I had ever enjoyed it before! That's why I'm so scared, Dave. You—you unleashed things in me. Ugly things. Things that frighten me. They ought to frighten you, too. You have a wife—a family—"

He groped for words that would reassure her, that would check what might easily explode into hysteria. "Listen to me, Janice, will you? We're both grown-up human beings. We had a need—a need to make love. You haven't seen your husband in months. My wife is away, and even when she was here she didn't give me the love I needed. We gave each other pleasure."

"We had no right to."

"When you see a drowning man, do you worry about whether you have a right to pull him out?"

"It isn't the same thing at all."

"But it *is*, don't you see?"

She didn't. Tears were running freely down her cheeks, now. Her hair was wildly disarrayed. She looked for all the world like an unhappy little girl, a ten-year-old suffering from some trivial disappointment. Until you looked down at the open flap of her robe, and saw the snowy rise of her breasts, and knew that she was older than ten.

She said in a hollow voice, "For six months I slept with Nick just about every night. I was a virgin before I met him, you know. But then I met him and married him and slept with him. And he got me to enjoy it, plenty. Then he was drafted and went away. I've only seen him three times since then. He came home after basic training, and he came home at Christmas, and he came home in the

spring. He didn't want me to come live with him at the base, though. Maybe he had some other girl there, I don't know. I think he regrets marrying me. I think he wishes he had his freedom back. Anyway, I've been all alone here." She chuckled. "At first I thought I'd go out of my mind. Then I started having a few dates with my old high-school friends. Innocent dates. We'd go to a movie, or maybe come up here and dance. I used to think those fellows were hotshots, but now I saw they were just kids compared to Nick—or you. So I never let them do anything, up here. I told myself I had to be faithful to Nick. God, I missed the loving so much! Once you get used to it, and then it gets taken away—But I never let them touch me. And I kept seeing you across the hall, and wondering about you, and—and now I know."

"Now you know what?"

"I wondered about you and your wife, and your kids, and what you were like. And I started to love you a little. Maybe you think it's funny. But you were older than Nick, even, and you seemed so intelligent, and you're big and not bad-looking, and I saw how wonderful you were with your kids. and I thought, what would it be like to be married to Mr. Hughes? What would it be like to sleep with Mr. Hughes? And then all of a sudden your wife was going away, and you were all alone, and then you were asking me to go out to dinner with you, and I thought it was all just a dream. When we came back here, and we danced, and you kissed me and opened my zipper and touched my body and everything—well, I just couldn't stop myself."

Hughes stared at her. So all this time she had been eyeing him too, he wondered? Pining for his company in bed. And finally the opportunity had come, for both of them.

But it wasn't quite the same. She was talking about love. While he thought of her as something soft and warm in bed, something he could use for physical gratification, ego salve, and a means of revenge for Ellen's coldness.

What am I getting into? he asked himself.

He didn't want complications.

He didn't want turmoil. All he wanted was simple physical gratification from this girl. He didn't want love, because love meant breaking away somehow from Ellen and the kids. He couldn't afford to become emotionally entangled with this girl. The thought ricocheted round his mind. *Don't start something that can get out of control. You've got the kids to think about. You don't want to get pitched into a position where you may have to split up their home, you big dope.*

He put his arm around her shoulders. "Jan, let's go have another martini. We don't want them to go to waste."

"No. Please, Dave."

"Let's. We're just in a mood like this because everything was so perfect before. The higher you climb, the further the drop afterward."

She shook her head. "Take the shaker and go back to your apartment, Dave."

"Janice—"

"No." She sounded firm. "We've had our fun. Now let's call it quits, right here."

"Don't say that."

"I have to. Look, Dave—I owe you thanks for a wonderful dinner. And we danced for a while, and that was good too. And then we went to bed and made love, and that was good. Let's quit while we're ahead."

"I want to see you again, Jan."

She shook her head. "You mustn't."

"We have the whole summer!"

"I know. That's what's so horrible, Dave. That's what frightens me. Because I love you so much already. I don't want things to get any more serious. We have to end it right here. For Ellen's sake. For the sake of your kids. And for my sake. Nick would never let me get a divorce. He'd just kill me, if he knew. That's the sort of person he is."

Hughes summoned a mental picture of Nick Keller—a big, burly kid with a glowering, sour expression and bulging muscles. Yes, Keller might very easily be the sort who would kill an erring wife.

But he lingered. He wanted to take the girl again. Desire was returning.

"Please get dressed, Dave. Let's not prolong this any more than we have to."

Slowly, he pulled his trousers on and began to slip into his shirt. Janice brought the cocktail shaker and the liquor bottles to him. She did not look him straight in the eye. It was as if she were thinking, *You are the man I have just committed adultery with, and I am stricken with shame. Your body has penetrated the most secret part of my body. Your hands have touched my nakedness. I'm ashamed to let your eyes meet my eyes now.*

"Go," she said.

"At least a kiss? Just something to remember you by, Janice?"

"Please. No."

He shrugged, not wanting to force himself on her. Gathering up the bottles and his jacket, he walked slowly to the door. He turned, smiling.

"It was a wonderful evening, Jan."

She nodded. "It was. But now let's try to forget it ever happened."

"I can't ever do that."

She managed a faint smile. "I don't think I can, either."

She closed the outside door behind him. He walked across the hall, fumbled in his pocket for his key, and opened his door. Going in, he put the bottles away, moving like a mechanical man, and carried the cocktail shaker into the kitchen, storing it in the refrigerator.

He walked back into the livingroom.

He sat down heavily and put his head in his hands.

It had been a long day. It had been an unbelievable day, with its hectic start and its hectic finish, and the strange hours of desire in between. The presence of Ellen still seemed almost tangible in the house. And already he had deceived her. Another woman's sweat had mingled with his own. Another woman's loins had received his maleness. Another woman's breasts had heaved under his chest.

All right, he thought. *Now I've slept with Janice Keller. I've had a good night's fun in the saddle,*

and in a cockeyed kind of way I've had revenge on Ellen.

Where do I go from here?

He figured Janice's remorse was strictly temporary. It was precisely what you would expect from a young wife who has weakened and cheated on her soldier husband. But once the first flush of guilt was past, Janice would remember how good it had been to have a man's weight on top of her body, and she would be available again.

But what then? She talked about being in love with him. And maybe he would fall in love with her. too. She was young and beautiful, and pliable. Eager to learn. He could shape her, mold her into a woman who would sparkle in every way. But—

The kids. Ellen. The kids.

Especially the kids. Ellen had grown cold, and he could no longer truthfully say he loved her. But Tony and Erika were the keystones of his existence. To give up Ellen would mean to give them up too. And he could never do that. Never.

What now, little Lothario?

He had made love to another man's beautiful wife. In all probability, he would be able to have her again before long. But the day of reckoning would come. Ellen would return from the mountains; Keller would come home from the army. Decisions would have to be made, inner conflicts resolved before long. And every decision was an impossible one. *Keller will kill her if she leaves him. Ellen will get the kids in any divorce settlement.* Everything pointed to disaster.

Be wise, buster. Forget Janice Keller. You had your one-night stand. Cherish it, boy. But don't tear off any more.

Sighing, he rose, went into the bedroom, began to undress. All the drinks and the bout of love had left him tired. He threw his clothes on the chair, washed his face and brushed his teeth in a desultory way, and got into bed. The double bed. The conjugal bed. The bed in which Tony and Erika had been conceived.

He fell asleep almost at once.

He did not dream.

Mornng came quickly. He rose, feeling bloodshot and worn, and dressed and went down for the Sunday *Times*. He bought it at a stand on the next block. The neighborhood was still asleep, at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning. The day's heat had not yet descended.

Upstairs, he threw together a sort of a breakfast, ate it without enthusiasm, and tried to read the newspaper. But his attention wavered. He had no interest in foreign affairs this morning, or in the pennant race, or in the antics of the Senate.

He tossed the papers aside. It was half past ten. He paced around for a while.

He went across the hall and rang Janice Keller's doorbell.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Me. Dave."

She opened the peephole. "Go away."

"Please let me in, Janice. I want to see you."

"No. We mustn't. I told you last night, we have to forget everything that happened."

"*Please,* Janice."

"No." The peephole closed. Angrily, he rang the bell again, without response. He waited, scowling, finally decided to give up. He couldn't stand out here in the hall ringing her bell all day. The neighbors might come out to investigate. She might even call the police.

Shoulders slumping, he returned to his own apartment. He admitted that Janice had done the wise thing. For everyone's sake, she and he would have to maintain locked doors between themselves.

The image of her danced before his eyes. Satiny buttocks, bouncing breasts. His throat became dry.

Forget her. That's all you can do. Just forget her.

He answered himself: *Easier said than done.*

The doorbell rang. He sprang up, threw the door open without bothering to ask who it was.

"Janice!"

She was wearing only a robe. She burst in, eyes red-rimmed, face pale.

"Darling, I'm sorry I wouldn't open up. I had to come, now. I *had* to," she said huskily.

She ran to him.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY MADE LOVE AGAIN; not stormily, as they had done the first time, but calmly, almost with restraint. Already they had become veterans of each other's bodies. Already he knew which parts of her body to touch when he wanted to bring a little sigh of pleasure to her lips. Already he knew the signs that told him she was approaching the peak of her ecstacy.

She made love hungrily, like some kind of devouring beast that would seize hold of his body and ingest it—some weird giant crustacean, he kept thinking, a huge sea-clam or something like that. Her body overflowed with desire. He realized with awe that he had unleashed a torrent of lust in her. For months she had penned it back, living alone, rigidly repressing the throbbing currents of passion that raged in her body. But now he had thrown open the spillway, and there was no confining the outpouring flood of desire. They made love twice that afternoon.

On my bed, he thought with a twinge of guilt. *Ellen's bed and mine. The bed I fathered my children in.*

Somehow that thought made the whole thing even more obscene than it already was. He wondered how Tony and Erika would feel if they knew that their father, the big, strong father that they worshipped, was actually a weakling who couldn't keep his desires to himself, and who had to soothe himself by groping sweatily with some strange woman.

He wasn't practicing what he preached to them. If Tony insisted on eating ten hot dogs, he got a little speech about how it wasn't always smart to gratify every desire you had.

If you ate ten hot dogs, you would get sick. and you'd regret your earlier gluttony.

"But I *want* ten hot dogs, Daddy!"

How can you make a seven-year-old look behind the immediate desire to the later unpleasant consequences? It seems so obvious to you that ten hot dogs is too many, for a small boy or for anyone else.

And what about you?

"But I *want* to sleep with Janice Keller," you were protesting, whinning like a seven-year-old.

Sure you do. And any idiot could look past those consequences, too. Any idiot but you.

After the second time, they rose, and he went into the kitchen and fetched last night's martinis, and gravely they toasted each other. A note of hysteria was not very far beneath the surface. He recognized, and she seemed to recognize too, that both of them were caught up in a compulsion too powerful for either of them to break. All they might do was talk about the Serious Consequences of what they were engaged in. But all such thoughts vanished like phantoms with the first stirring in the loins.

After the martinis, Janice wanted to make love again. Hughes shook her off. Three times in one afternoon was beyond him just now.

"I'm not in training, honey," he told her. "You've got to give me a chance to get back in shape for this sort of stuff."

"But I want you, Davey," she wheedled.

"Later," he told her. "Later." He broke away from her and went into the bathroom. His face, reflected in the mirror over the sink, looked gray and weary. *Better start slowing down, Davey-boy,* he told himself. *You're thirty-four, not nineteen. Don't set a pace that'll fold you up from exhaustion.*

When he came out, Janice was sitting on the edge of the bed, naked, pouting. She looked so pretty he had to kiss her, and as he stooped over her she caught hold of him and dragged him down on top of her. Hughes struggled to get loose, not neglecting to consider the irony of the situation: he was fighting to disengage himself from a beautiful and amorous blonde! She managed to get the robe off him, to press her warm breasts against him, but his body simply would not respond.

"What's wrong, Davey?"

"I'm tired. You didn't believe me when I said I was an old man. Baby, you've got to show some mercy."

"I can't help myself. I'm all tingling inside."

"I wish I could cooperate. But I can't." He smiled, a mirthless and hollow smile, trying to apologize for the fact that he was a little past his best years. *But only a little!* he thought. *Who does she think I am, anyway? Can't she realize that males aren't capable of infinite repetitions of the act the same day?*

She was beginning to comprehend, though, and, disappointedy, she gave up hope for the time being. It was past five o'clock now. She slipped into her robe and told him she was going back to her apartment to prepare supper for them.

"Come over at six o'clock. And bring the martini shaker, too."

Hughes nodded as she left. He tidied up the bedroom—it looked as though a cyclone had hit it—and took a shower. At six on the dot, he was in the hall ringing Janice's bell.

She met him with a kiss—not a housewifely peck, but a warm, welcoming tongue-and-body kind of kiss. He smelled food-smells within.

"We're having hamburgers," she said. "It turned out that that was all the meat I had in the house."

"Fine here," Hughes said.

There were two martinis left in the shaker. He poured them out, and they gravely toasted each other again, and then they ate. Janice turned out to be a good cook, though not really exceptional.

Dinner revived Hughes' energy. He helped Janice clean up, and then they went into the livingroom, sat down on her couch. She put a record on. Beethoven's Seventh Symphony.

"Don't you love Beethoven?" she asked.

"What? Oh—oh, yes. Of course. The Seventh is one of my favorites," Hughes said hastily. He told himself in annoyance not to seem so surprised when Janice came up with a remark like that. Busty blondes didn't necessarily *have* to be ignorant.

She sprawled out full length with her head on his lap, and they listened to the symphony. His hand crept into the front of her gown and rested lightly on her breasts, and he felt her nipples slowly growing erect beneath his touch. By the end of the first movement, she was breathing harshly. When the slow movement came to its end, Hughes made a

move as though to get up and turn the record over, but she held him back, tugging at him in urgent desire.

This time he was able to satisfy her. When it was over, she turned the record herself, and put a stack more on the changer. She returned to the couch. It was Hughes' turn to nestle, now; she lay down parallel to him on the outside of the couch, and he put his head in her bosom and closed his eyes. He realized, almost immediately afterward, that he had fallen asleep.

He sat up. "What time is it?"

"Half past ten."

"My God, I've been asleep for almost three hours!"

"You were smiling. Did you know you smile in your sleep, Davey?"

He ignored the question. "I shouldn't have stayed here so late. Suppos Ell—suppose my wife was trying to call me from the country? Where could I say I had been till ten-thirty on a Sunday night?"

"You were at a neighbor's, because you were lonely. Doesn't your wife trust you?"

"That's not the point. I shouldn't be here so late."

"Does that mean you'll never sleep over?"

"Impossible," Hughes said. "If—God forbid—something serious should happen up there, and Ellen should try to call me in the middle of the night, and didn't find me home—no, I couldn't take that chance. Good night, Jan."

"Good night? Can't I come with you?"

Hughes blinked. He hadn't thought of that. No

one would be trying to call Janice in the middle of the night. There was no reason why she couldn't sleep across the hall. No reason but one:

She would be sleeping in the marital bed.

Hughes felt suddenly chilly. It would be wonderful to lie next to Janice all night, to have her silky thighs and sweet breasts only inches away. But somehow almost blasphemous to bring the mistress right into the house, to install her in the marriage bed. That was going too far.

You had to draw the line somewhere. You had to keep some notion alive of what was proper and what wasn't. Otherwise you could go right on and make love to her anywhere. In Macy's window. Or under Ellen's nose. Just because you were committing a sin, that didn't mean you should sin as obviously as possible.

Letting Janice sleep all night in Ellen's place made Hughes feel queasy. He knew it was a ridiculous place to draw the line, but he couldn't help himself. This wasn't a matter of logic. The emotions aren't always logical. He knew he wouldn't be happy about inviting Janice into Ellen's bed.

"No," he said. "You'd—better not."

"Why? Don't you want me to sleep with you?"

"Of course I do. But—but—" His hands shook. "Jan, it isn't right. Having you sleep in *her* bed."

"It was all right this afternoon."

"But not all night, Jan." He looked at her in agonized appeal. "Let me get used to this business. Jan. I've never done it before. I've rushed into it too fast. I've got to take it more slowly."

She shook her head, frowning, and said, "You're

being silly, you know. Once you've deceived your wife, it doesn't really matter whether you let me into the bed or not. Or is that too logical?"

"It's perfectly logical," Hughes said. "But what we're doing doesn't involve logic. Let me handle it my way, Jan. Good night?"

She smiled. "All right, Dave. Good night."

They kissed—warmly, but without fire—and he gathered up the cocktail shaker and retreated to his own home.

He got into bed. But his overtired body would not yield to sleep. Stimulated past any hope of relaxation, he tossed and turned, tried to force his body to go limp and his mind to stop clicking. The hours dragged past. At one point, certain it was close to morning, he groped for his watch and was appalled to find it was only quarter to two. He burrowed into the pillow again, waiting in vain for sleep to take him.

When morning finally did come, he had no clear memory of having been anything but awake all night, but he decided he had dropped off for a light doze shortly before dawn. His head throbbed and his face looked ghastly in the mirror as he shaved. His eyes were bloodshot and rimmed with hideous black circles.

He made breakfast for himself, eating without enthusiasm, and dressed. Only then did he think of Janice. He crossed the hall and rang her bell, but there was no answer. He kept ringing, thinking perhaps she was still asleep, but it became clear that she had already left for work. It was only twenty after eight. The bookstore, Hughes decided, probably opened its doors at eight-thirty to catch early

commuters looking for subway reading.

Shrugging away his disappointment, he locked up and left. His office was in lower Manhattan, a thirty-minute drive via the expressway. This morning, his hands trembled as he tried to turn on the ignition. He could not remember when he had last felt so exhausted and hung over on a Monday morning. He drove leadenly to work, leadenly entered his office, leadenly embarked on the day's routine. When people passed his desk, he smiled leadenly at them, saying little. He was in something of an intermediary position at the firm, anyway—neither top executive nor mere clerical underling, but isolated in a gulf of his own, with executive responsibility but without full executive prestige—and salary. Somehow he struggled through the morning, fighting his work all the way. At eleven-fifteen his phone rang. He picked it up.

"Hughes."

"Mike here, Dave. All set for lunch?"

"Oh—Mike." Hughes scowled; he had forgotten all about the lunch appointment with his brother-in-law! "Yeah, I suppose. But no three-hour siesta today, Mike. I've got a lot of work."

"You're not the only one. Hollis just tossed the August 2 script back at me for a top-to-bottom rewrite, and as soon as I've had lunch I've got to run home and get at the typewriter. Meet you at the Exec?"

"Right. What about twelve-fifteen?"

"Fine," Niles said. "See you." He hung up.

The Exec was a middle-priced restaurant on Madison Avenue about ten blocks north of Hughes'

office, in the lower Thirties. He left his office shortly before twelve and hiked up to it. The lean, tense figure of his brother-in-law was visible a block away, pacing up and down pantherishly. Niles always paced. A furious reserve of nervous energy was imprisoned within him, and he was never still, never relaxed.

As Hughes drew near, Niles whistled. "Christ, Dave, are you sick?"

"Huh?"

"You look like your own ghost. What's the matter, man? The bags under your eyes have bags of their own."

Hughes smiled faintly. "I didn't sleep well last night, I guess."

"Not used to an empty bed, eh, Dave?" Niles nudged him confidentially. "I know what it's like. You roll over and expect to grab a nice piece of tail, and there's nothing there but an empty pillow. You can't do much with a pillow unless you're really desperate."

They went inside and found an empty table. Hughes was grateful to take the weight off his feet. His head throbbed mercilessly.

"Drink?" Niles said.

"No, not for me. My head hurts enough."

"Mind if I have one?"

"Would that stop you anyway?" Hughes asked.

"Right you are." Niles ordered a double bourbon. Probably his second or third of the day, Hughes thought.

They ordered a simple lunch. Lunch with Niles sometimes could get on the expensive side, if it dragged out at one of the fancy places. Hughes was

thankful that his brother-in-law was in a hurry to get home, today. After Saturday night, Hughes' budget was in delicate condition.

"Have you heard from Ellen?" Niles asked.

"Not yet. I'm calling her tonight. You have any messages for Beth?"

"You could tell her that everything's as usual," Niles said. "Don't say anything about the rewrite. She'll start worrying things up and figuring that I'm about to lose my option, or something." Niles shook his head. "You look *lousy*, Dave."

"I told you, I didn't sleep much last night."

"Or the night before?"

"No, not Saturday either."

"You ought to see a doctor," Niles said. "Before you know it you'll be a wreck. Insomnia can wreck you. I know, Dave."

"I'll get over it. I don't need a doctor."

"Get yourself a doctor," Niles repeated. "Or else a good piece of quail. Best sleeping powder there is. Hey—don't look so surprised, man! I didn't mean—"

Hughes felt the knot in his stomach slowly subside. "I know. You were just joking."

"Hell, Dave, you looked like you were just poleaxed. What's so shocking about the idea of picking up a piece? A healthy man going from weekend to weekend without any tail is bound to crack down."

"I suppose you've had plenty of amusement over the weekend," Hughes said stiffly.

"Wait a minute," Niles protested. "Look, you're Beth's brother and all, I know. And you've got your sister way up high on a pedestal. I don't want to say

anything that would offend you."

"I'm not fifteen years old, Mike. I won't punch you in the nose if you've been cheating on Beth. That's strictly between you and Beth, and Big Brother won't meddle."

Niles grinned. "I don't figure you, Dave. Lookie, I've got certain impulses. When Beth's available, I satisfy those impulses with Beth, because she's my wife and I love her. But sometimes Beth isn't available. Like now. I got drives I can't control, and in my business there's plenty of available stuff for a man who needs it. So sometimes I relieve my impulses with someone else. It's all pure and healthy, like going to a doctor for headache relief. It doesn't diminish my love for Beth one smidgeon. Naturally, I don't tell her about it, because, well, it wouldn't be right, but—holy Jesus, man, do you mean to sit there and tell me you've never stepped out on Ellen once, not *once* in all these years?"

Hughes felt the ground giving way beneath him. Of all possible conversations he might have had with Niles, this was the worst. And only a week ago, he could have answered in perfect confidence. Now he had to lie. *Had* to, because otherwise he would make himself vulnerable to Niles and thus pave the way for his own possible destruction.

"No," he said. "Never."

"Look me in the eye and say that!"

With effort, Hughes lifted his head from his soup. "Never. I've never cheated on Ellen."

Niles seemed convinced—and impressed. In a hushed voice he said, "If I had a hat on, I'd take it off to you. Nine years and never once! A regular

superman of fidelity! And I suppose you can look down from your mountain of moral superiority and think I'm a stinking louse for cutting corners on your sister."

"I haven't criticized you, have I?"

"But you're thinking it," Niles said. "I can almost read your mind. You're a faithful husband, and you think I'm slime because I've slept with what I could get."

"Look, Mike, you live your life your way and I'll—"

"Sure. But just let me warn you, Dave. As brother to brother, practically. Your time will come. Maybe even this summer. A trim little behind will wiggle at you and you'll fall for it, and next thing you know you'll be right down in the mud with 99% of your fellow husbands. So don't get puffed up on your moral superiority just yet. You wait. Your time will come."

Hughes fidgeted uncomfortably. Niles did not know the truth yet, but he was unpleasantly close to the mark. Hughes wished this conversation had never come about. By bluntly admitting his own infidelities, Niles had placed himself in a position of advantage. Niles' scorn would be unbounded if the truth about Hughes ever came into the open.

He managed to change the subject, and they finished the meal without further discomfort for Hughes. That afternoon he felt particularly tired, and the work was more of a strain than ever. But he looked forward to the evening. Janice was exhausting but she was worth it, he thought. Maybe he would die of overexertion loving her, but what a way to die!

First, though, he had to phone Ellen.

He took care of it the moment he arrived home, at half past five that evening. He waited, tense and uncomfortable, while the long-distance operator completed the call.

"Hello," Beth's voice said.

"This is Dave, Beth. How's everything?"

"Oh, just swell, swell. Hold on a sec, and I'll get Ellen."

"I saw Mike for lunch today. He says to tell you everything's going smoothly."

"Fine," Beth said. Hughes heard her call for Ellen. "She's outside with the kids," Beth explained. "It's my turn to cook, tonight. Oh—here she is."

"Hello?" Ellen said.

Hughes' throat was dry. "Hello, darling. Has everything been okay?"

"Just wonderful. We've had the most glorious weather and you ought to see the way Erika is swimming. And Tony, of course—like a fish. We're getting tan already, and I've taken off at least three pounds so far. How are you managing, dear?" she added suddenly.

"Fine," Hughes said without conviction.

"Not lonely?"

"Sure I'm lonely."

Ellen laughed. "I'm glad. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, or something. How's the cooking?"

"I'm managing. I went out for dinner one night this weekend. With one of the bachelor execs," he tacked on desperately.

"Which one?"

"Tommy Klein. You don't know him." *Because*

I just made him up, Hughes said silently. "He's one of the account supervisors. Swell fellow."

"I'm glad you're not deserted, at least. Miss me?"

"Mucho."

"Me too. I can't wait till Friday. Especially Friday night, darling."

Hughes blinked. Had a couple of days' separation made Ellen *that* eager to go to bed with him? Or, perhaps, was she worried about possible infidelities he might engage in? Or had she unburdened herself to Beth and received the sound advice that she ought to sleep with her husband more often? In any event, this was a different Ellen on the phone now.

Hughes said, "Me too, hon. If traffic's light we'll try to get there by six. And maybe a quick swim before supper. The weather's been miserable here."

"Poor Dave! Well, we're murdering our budget with this call. Say hello to the kids and then let's hang up."

Wife. Children. Like misty phantoms.

Ellen had sounded so warm, so *different.*

He chewed his lip in distress. *Maybe I ought to—*

The doorbell rang. Scowling, he opened it. Janice stood there. She had put on a tight tee shirt and a pair of shorts, and her breasts ballooned upward sensationally at him.

"Time for dinner," she said. "But a kiss first."

She stepped up against him. He began to tremble as he took her in his arms. He put his hands on her buttocks and squeezed tight, and their mouths met. and his soul was weighted with despair.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS ALMOST DOMESTIC, THAT EVENING. Janice had cooked lambchops, and Hughes contributed two cans of beer, and they had a pleasant little dinner. After the dishes were taken care of, Janice insisted on playing a record she had brought home from the store that afternoon. It was Mozart's Symphony Number Forty, and she had picked it out because she wanted to hear some Mozart. She heard it and she loved it, and after it had been played she said, "Do you have any Mozart records, Dave?"

"A few." He had a small record library, a mediocre hi-fi set. In recent years the family budget had left little room for record-buying.

"I'd like to hear them."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

So he went across the hall and rummaged through the record shelf, coming up with the *Linz* symphony and *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* and a disk of excerpts from *The Marriage of Figaro,* and he went back into Janice's apartment. Although his phonograph was better than hers, he still felt queasy about letting her spend time in his apartment.

On his way across, he saw one of his neighbors come out of her apartment, carrying a pail of garbage down to the incinerator. Hughes winced and stepped quickly through the door, which he had left ajar.

"Old lady Barnett just saw me," he said. "She

was dumping garbage."

"Is there any law against neighbors visiting each other?"

"In our case there is," Hughes said grimly. "The old biddy knows Ellen's away for the summer, and she knows you live alone. And since she has a naturally evil mind, she can figure out the rest—especially if she sees us commuting back and forth across the hall all the time."

"We ought to be careful, then."

Hughes nodded. "Yes. We ought to be careful. I brought you some Mozart."

They played *Eine kleine Natchtmusik*, which Janice loved, and the *Linz* symphony, which didn't appeal to her as much. While *Figaro* was on, she sat down on the floor near his feet, and in a sudden surprising impulse Hughes bent over, seized her teeshirt's hem, and drew it up over her head. She looked up, laughing.

"I thought you'd be cooler that way," he explained.

"It's cooler without the bra, too."

"Glad you told me." He leaned over again and unhooked the bra. It dropped away. He started down at the smoothness of her bare back, with the round bulk of one breast just visible at her side. She sat crosslegged there, bare to the waist, listening to the music and rocking in time with it. Above her, Hughes tried to relax, but the coppery taste of desire filled his mouth. Before the record came to its end, he leaned over a third time, putting his hands over both her breasts. They rose, high and firm, into his palms, and the nipples pressed like hard little nuts against

his skin. She craned her neck upward, looking at him upside-down, and there was laughter and joyful desire in her blue eyes. She elbowed her way up onto the couch without breaking the contact between her breasts and his hands.

"I don't understand why they fascinate you so much," she said. "They're just meat. Swinging lumps of meat."

"Lovely meat."

"Do you really think so?"

"They're beautiful," he said. "Two poems in flesh."

She giggled. "I used to hate them. I used to be skinny, and then when I was twelve or so these great awful fat *things* sprouted on me. They jiggled so much, and they used to hurt when they were growing, and all the boys in class would look at my chest and try to touch them in the coatroom. They just seemed like nuisances to me. Big floppy lumps of meat that had to be hidden from sight."

"Big beautiful mountains of flesh. They ought to put your bust in the Hall of Fame. They're the loveliest I've ever seen."

"Have you seen many?"

"You're getting nosy."

"Prettier than your wife's?"

"Ellen's well stacked too," Hughes said. "But she's had children. She's past thirty. You're still ripe, vibrant, firm—"

"You're only the second man I've ever slept with, Davey. But you must have slept with a lot of women besides your wife."

"Some," he admitted.

"Since you were married?"

"No. Not till—not till **you.**"

"Honest, Davey?"

"I'm getting tired of this conversation," he said. "It's altogether too personal. Let's change the subject, shall we?"

"You change it. What do you want to talk about? Baseball? The weather? Foreign aid? Mozart?"

"Let's not talk at all," he said. He put his mouth over hers, feeling her soft lips against his. They kissed with fierce intensity, tongue seeking tongue, and she squirmed around so she was against him, and he found the catch on her zipper and opened it, and began to work the shorts down, rolling them over her hips, past the round, taut, sleek globular buttocks, and then she was naked and she was fumbling with his belt, and he felt desire thrusting from him like a lance, and then his clothes were in a heap on the floor and her body was up against his fitting it as closely as though they were one flesh, and, breathing rapidly, harshly, breaths mingling, their bodies joined and he squeezed her breasts tight and shut his eyes and she began to move slowly, and he clamped his jaws hard to hold back the ecstacy, but gradually it took hold of him as their bodies moved faster and faster, and he felt a wall of flames surrounding their two linked bodies, tremendous heat, all-consuming heat, heat that crisped him to an ash, and he smiled, welcoming the blaze of the heat.

And at the moment of climax he gasped and cried out hoarsely, *"I love you, Janice, I love you!"* and he felt the shudder in his loins and the answering quiver in hers, and then it was over and the magic

was gone, and they were just two naked sweating people lying close together on a couch in a small room on a hot night, and she was limp with fulfillment and he was still holding her breasts and he was thinking, over and over again, *What did I say to her? My God in heaven, whatever made me tell her that I loved her? My God!*

But the words had been spoken, had been wrung from him at a moment when his inmost soul was speaking, and there was no calling them back now.

I love you, Janice, I love you.

He found himself cataloguing what there was to love about this girl. *I love her breasts and the firmness of her buttocks and the warmth of her loins. I love the way she makes love as if each time is going to be the last there'll ever be, and she wants to squeeze the most from it. I love her youth and her freshness. I love her hunger for Mozart and good books and great ideas. I love the way she makes me think I'm manly and strong and tremendously wise. I love the way she cooks for me as if her life depended on keeping me well fed.*

With sudden awe he realized that he indeed loved Janice Keller for some very substantial reasons. He became aware that he might quite easily want to give up Ellen and spend the rest of his life with Janice.

What about the kids? came the nagging question.

What about Nick Keller?

He had no answers for those. Instead, he brushed the questions irritably from his mind, and, leaning over, tenderly kissed the rosy nipples of Janice's breasts. She smiled without opening her eyes, and

pulled his head down to rest on her bosom.

He thought of Ellen, far away, with whom he had spoken only a few hours ago. Waiting for him. Looking forward to Friday night. Ellen actually anxious to make love to him. And he remembered another Ellen, Ellen of too many years ago, whose breasts had not been so delightful as this girl's but who had been almost as beautiful, an Ellen still to endure pregnancy, and an Ellen whose appetite for love was insatiable. He realized that he saw in this girl a rebirth of that old Ellen, but even more glorious, even more wonderful. *But what if the old Ellen should come back to life—*

He tried to shut off all thought. He nestled against the soft, warm, yielding bosom, and blotted fear from his mind.

He returned to his own apartment around eleven, and slept soundly. The next day, Tuesday, they spent the evening in his apartment— "what if Ellen tries to call?" he asked fearfully. "I ought to be home some nights,"—and they made love again, and he began to find himself wearing under the arduous pace of sleeping with Janice one or two times every evening, but he said nothing.

On Wednesday they went out for dinner. Dutch treat—Janice insisted, and he put up only a token protest, since last Saturday's extravagance had made a serious dent in his personal budget.

At the restaurant that night, they had their first brush with calamity.

It was Hughes' fault. Janice had wanted to go back to Don's, but Hughes had objected: it was bad to visit the same restaurant together too often. Be-

sides, Don's was too expensive. They went, instead, at his suggestion, to a Chinese restaurant in Kew Gardens, a fifteen-minute drive from home. He laughed off her fears that perhaps they were tempting fate by eating so close to their own neighborhood, but he realized that his own bravado was perhaps an error.

It was.

They were in the midst of their egg-rolls when Hughes became aware that another couple that had just entered the restaurant was pausing near his table.

He did not dare to look up. He was certain they were people he knew. He was right.

"Davey! Hey, fellow, haven't seen you in ages!"

Hughes felt as though a hammer had just crashed into the back of his skull.

Keep calm, he told himself. *Don't goof.*

He smiled and looked up. "Dan! Martha!"

They were old friends, more Ellen's friends than his. In the past year the friendship had drifted apart from sheer old age. Dan and Martha Hyman had been friends of the Hughes' for seven or eight years, long enough for the friendship to settle into the occasional-visit category.

Janice looked flustered. And Hughes saw that Dan Hyman, after his original effusive greeting, now seemed disconcerted and hesitant, as though perhaps he regretted having come over.

Hughes said quickly, "Dan, Martha, I want you to meet my cousin Janet. Jan, this is Dan and Martha Hyman, a couple of very good friends of mine." Warming to his theme now, Hughes went on

in explanation, "Jan lives in Cleveland, but she's in New York for the summer. It's about ten years since I last saw her, and I nearly had a stroke when I saw what a knockout she's turned into." *Stop there,* he thought. *Don't overdo it.*

"She's a charming girl," Martha Hyman said. "Do you go to college, Janet?"

Janice managed to grin. "I'm a senior at Western Reserve," she said.

Good girl! Hughes exulted. *Spoken like a trouper. And these busybodies aren't likely to know anything about Western Reserve, either.*

Hughes said, "And don't get any ideas, Dan. For your lecherous information, she's pinned to a basketball player seven feet tall, and isn't available."

"Too bad," Hyman said with mock regret. "Too too bad. But where's Ellen tonight?"

"Ellen's in the mountains with the kids," Hughes said. "I'm a weekend vacationer this year. I'll be going up there Friday."

"Send her our best, will you?" Martha Hyman said. "Well, nice to have met you, Janet. Good luck in college."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hyman," Janice said demurely.

The Hymans grinned, waved, and moved off to a table in a distant corner of the restaurant. Hughes let his breath out in relief. Janice frowned.

"They're looking at us," she whispered.

"Your bust impresses Dan, that's all."

"Do you think they fell for the story?"

Hughes shrugged. "*Quien sabe*? They're smarter people than they look. But that bit about Western Reserve may have sold them. How'd you know where

it was, anyway?"

"Nick went there for two years. I remembered it was in Cleveland."

Hughes' legs were still trembling. "For the rest of this meal, remember that you're my cousin. No hand-holding. No footsie. You're my virgin little cousin from Cleveland, in the great big city for the summer. Okay?"

"Of course. But what if they guess the truth, Dave?"

"It would only be a guess. They couldn't prove anything."

But suppose they tell your wife that you were eating dinner with a blonde of such-and-such an age, with such-and-such a figure—maybe she'd know who they meant."

Hughes scowled. "Let's not worry about it. Dan Hyman has enough sins on his own ledger so that he won't rush to waggle a finger at me. Martha might let Ellen know, but I kind of doubt it. I'll just have to cross the Hymans off our social list, that's all. I'd be cooked if they asked me about my 'pretty cousin' in Ellen's hearing. I only have one female cousin, and she's got acne scars all over her face."

There was little pleasure in the rest of the meal. They ate quickly and left, Hughes waving to the Hymans as they went out. Only when they were in the car and several blocks from the restaurant did Janet dare to snuggle close to him.

"We'll have to be more careful," he said. "No eating out in the neighborhood from now on."

"Does it really matter, Dave?"

"Does *what* really matter? Getting caught by

friends of mine?"

"Yes."

"Of course it matters! If we ask for trouble, we'll get it. If enough people spot us out together, someone's bound to tip Ellen off in September."

"She'll know anyway, by then," Janice said calmly.

Hughes started to reply, then abruptly closed his mouth as the full implications of Janice's remarks began to sink in.

"Well, won't she?" Janice asked. "Aren't you going to tell her?"

"I—I hadn't thought that far ahead," he said inanely.

"What were you planning to do? Keep sleeping with me after Ellen came home?"

"Well—I—Christ, Jan, I haven't thought it all through yet!"

"I thought you had. Last night, when you said you loved me. You remember that?"

"Of course I remember that."

"It was true, wasn't it, Davey?"

He was silent.

"It was true, wasn't it, Davey?"

Perspiration drenched him. Agonizedly, he made himself say, "Yes . . . yes. It was true."

"What was?"

"That I—that I love you."

"It wasn't just something you said because we were making love when you said it?"

"I meant it," he said doggedly. "I love you, Janice."

"All right, then. What about Ellen?"

"I—don't know. There are the kids to think about. A lot of things to think about."

"But you'll let her know eventually, won't you?"

"I suppose. Dammit, *stop hounding me!*" he burst out suddenly. Then, immediately contrite, he said, "I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to explode. I'm still all pent up about running into the Hymans."

She burrowed against him, took his right hand off the wheel and put it in her lap where her legs joined her body. In a soft voice she said, "I was nagging, darling, and I'm sorry. But I have to know where I stand, don't you see? Because Nick will be getting out of the army soon, and I have to know how I'm going to explain everything to him."

Hughes gulped. He didn't like to think of the crisis that the return of Nick would precipitate. Not to mention the matter of Ellen and the kids.

"I've got to think it all out," he said. "Give me a little time to get everything straight. Don't rush me on this, Jan."

"I won't, darling."

"And I do love you." Once he had said it the first time, it was easier and easier afterward.

"Really?"

"Really."

He pulled the car up in a parking spot a block from the house. "You go ahead," he told her. "I'll get parked and stroll around the block a couple of times."

"Why?"

"We've had one tight pinch already tonight. If Mrs. Barnett happens to see us come in together, the cat will be altogether out of the bag. Go ahead."

"All right. But hurry."

He timed off five minutes before he dared to go upstairs. No one saw him get out of the elevator. He went into his apartment, leaving the door slightly ajar, and a moment later Janice slipped quietly in.

"Damn all nosy old ladies," she said.

"That old lady has the Ten Commandments on her side, lovergirl."

They laughed. Janice mopped her forehead. "Isn't this heat *ever* going to end?"

"It's only 91," he said. "Pretend you live in the tropics where 91 is blessedly cool weather."

"I live here, and 91 is *h-o-t*. Mind if I take a shower?"

"Not at all."

As she began to peel off her clothes, he added, "I think I'll take one too. With you.

They undressed and raced into the bathroom. There was some hesitation while they got the water adjusted to a level that neither scalded her nor froze him. The shower was fun: he soaped her until she was sleek and slippery, lingering long and lovingly over the cones of her breasts, and then she soaped him up, caressing him intimately in a way that made him gasp with delight, and then they rinsed clean and he towelled her until her skin was rosy all over, and she dried him off and they hugged and the hug turned to something more serious, and they went to the floor and made love right there, in the bathroom, on the cold, wet tiles, laughing all the time, and when it was over Janice smiled at him and said, "My backside is cold. But this was fun. Let's do it again some time!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT RAINED ON THURSDAY EVENING, and there was a break in the heat, for the first time in over a week. For the first time, too, since their affair had begun, Hughes did not make love with Janice that evening.

He explained to her, "I'll be going up to the country tomorrow to see my family. Ellen will think I haven't made love in a week. I have to act all foaming-at-the-mouth and lustful, and unless we skip tonight I won't be very convincing."

"My poor darling Davey," Janice laughed. "He has to get ready for a visit to his wife as if he's training for a five-mile race."

"It isn't funny," Hughes said.

"I suppose. So I'll have to go from Thursday to Sunday without you, darling? I don't know how I'll survive. You've gotten me into some terribly bad habits, Davey."

"Bad, but pleasant."

"What time will you be home on Sunday?"

Hughes shrugged. "I guess around eight or nine. Not much later than that."

"I'll be waiting for you," Janice said, and there was a gleam in her eye.

For the rest of that evening, Hughes resisted temptation, and the hours passed chastely. He was relieved when eleven o'clock came, and he was able to escape into his own apartment, into his own bed, alone. Five nights of Janice had been five nights

of sheer Paradise, but on the sixth a man had to rest. The pace had been killing. Although he had never expected to find himself feeling that way, he was actually grateful to be sleeping alone this night.

Maybe having too much of Janice is the wise thing to do, he thought in the moments before sleep. *Wear yourself out with her. Sleep with her until the last vestige of this crazy infatuation is burned away. Get a glut of her. Then go back to Ellen.*

But he knew, even as the thoughts came, that it was mere wishful thinking. What he and Janice had, he told himself, was more than mere randy lust. It was real love, of a sort. She had youth to offer, and beauty; he could give her, presumably, maturity and wisdom. Right now he was physically tired of her, true enough—but he had still relished her company this evening, and after a brief period of recuperation his desire for her was bound to return, strong as ever.

Which leaves me nowhere, he thought. *Can you love two women at once? You sure as hell can't be married to two at once. I could go for that system, though. Ellen as housekeeper and mother of my children, Janice as chief concubine. Too bad the law won't allow it.* He chuckled and let sleep take him.

The rain ceased during the night, and by morning it was evident that the heat was returning. Hughes packed a light suitcase, containing his swim-trunks and a few clothes for the weekend, and was outside his house at twenty past eight that morning. He had arranged for one of the other men in his office to pick him up and drive him to work on Fridays during the summer; Mike would then pick

him up at the office in the afternoon and take him up to the mountains. This way, he neither had to ride the subways nor to leave his own car in Manhattan for the weekend.

At three that afternoon, Niles phoned him. "Everything set, Dave?"

"What time will you be here?"

"Forty-five minutes?"

"Good enough," Hughes said.

He finished up his office work by half past three and went downstairs. Not much later, Niles' long blue Chrysler pulled up at the curb.

"Hop in, Dave. Dump the suitcase in back."

Hughes got aboard, and the car slid away from the curb again. He fastened his safety belt. Niles was a bug on safety belts—and, since he liked to drive at seventy or eighty miles an hour, installing belts in the car was a wise precaution.

Niles drove up to 34th Street and cut across town toward the Lincoln Tunnel approach. Traffic moved slowly; it seemed as though everyone in Manhattan were trying to get an early jump on the weekend.

"You get that rewrite thing taken care of?" Hughes asked conversationally.

Niles scowled. "Do you think I'd be going away for a weekend in the country if I hadn't?"

"They really sweat you, don't they?"

"They pay me accordingly," Niles said. "A man is willing to take a lot of crap for $35,000 a year. You can be awful meek if they make it worth your while."

Hughes tried to picture his brother-in-law bow-

ing and scraping and meekly accepting scathing criticism of his work. He couldn't form the image at all.

Niles went on, "I'm no dope, Dave. I'm socking a lot of that dough away. You know how much I made out of my investments last year?"

"No."

"Twenty thousand. And that doesn't count dividends. I'm not telling you this because I want to impress you, you understand. It's to show you what I'm working toward."

Go ahead, keep bragging, Hughes thought irritatedly. Out loud he said, "What's that?"

"I want to be a producer, Dave. I want to put together my own packages. *I'll* do the hiring and firing. And whatever I make will be corporate profits, maximum tax 52%. Michael Niles, Incorporated. But you need dough to get yourself a setup like that. You need dough to make dough. So I play the market. And I've been coming out ahead."

"You've been lucky."

"It isn't luck," Niles muttered. "Oh, there's luck in it, but it's really *sweat*. A good poker player needs to draw cards, but more than that he makes his own breaks. Well, it's the same way in the market. And I've made my own breaks. You've got to know when to take a profit, when to take a loss if you have to. You—*goddam bastard, why don't you learn to drive!*"

A small foreign car had cut diagonally in front of Niles at the tunnel approach. Niles blasted furiously on his horn. Cords stood out on his throat as he shouted abuse at the driver in front, who

took no notice.

"I feel like ramming him," Niles grated. "I'd knock him for a loop."

"Maybe he just didn't see you," Hughes suggested.

"Well, he *ought* to see me. Goddam bastard. What was I talking about?"

"How to play the market."

"Oh. Well—"

They entered the tunnel, glided across into New Jersey, turned right onto Route 4. Niles talked on and on, about his plans for squeezing the maximum possible number of dollars out of the television industry, and thus repaying himself for all manner of fancied slights over the past years. Hughes listened, half amused, half annoyed. At the rate Niles was going, he'd kill himself from hypertension before he was fifty. Beth would be a rich widow. But that would be very little satisfaction for Niles.

As traffic thinned out, Niles let the car have its head. The speedometer indicator crept up, to fifty-five, to sixty, to sixty-five. Niles preferred to pay an occasional fine, and to travel at top speed whenever he could. Only when the needle was edging seventy in a fifty-mile zone did he begin to slacken on the accelerator.

"Listen," he said. "About that lunch conversation we had on Monday—"

"Yes?"

"I told you a lot of things that were strictly confidential. I mean, if Beth—"

Hughes grinned. "What kind of idiot do you think I am, Mike? I wouldn't say a word to Beth."

"I had to make sure," Niles said uncomfortably. "I mean, sometimes brother-sister loyalty is pretty strong, and you might figure it was your duty to tell her I've been stepping out a little. And I wouldn't want that. She's pretty happy, the way things are, and I'm happy, and I just don't want to rock the boat any. See?"

"Sure, Mike. Sure. I see."

They were on Highway 17 now, a broad superhighway that arches up into the Catskills and then swings westerly far across the state to Binghamton and Elmira and finally Lake Erie. The big car hummed smoothly along. They were making good time; they would be at the bungalow colony not long after six.

Niles was saying, "I may want some fun now and then, Dave, but dammit, I'm a good husband! Beth doesn't lack for a thing. And—"

"You don't have to justify yourself, Mike. You've slept with other women since you were married. Okay. You did it, and you did it because you *had* to. Don't sit there telling yourself that you're a good husband after all. That just makes it worse. Accept what you've done, admit that it was wrong but you couldn't help yourself, and let it go at that."

Niles laughed. "The way you talk, you sound like you ought to be on my payroll as a spiritual adviser. You reeled that stuff off like you meant it."

"I did."

"For me or for you?"

"You're the one who's been stepping out," Hughes said.

"But you had a bunch of neat packaged excuses ready on the tip of your tongue. Sometimes I wonder

about you, Dave. Despite what you said on Monday about—"

"Look," Hughes said nervously, "every time I'm with you these days we seem to talk only about cheating our wives. Let's get off it and back to the stock market. Ellen and I are thinking of investing—for capital gains, you know. Now, I've been thinking about Texas Instruments and Universal Controls, particularly, and I wonder—"

He managed to keep the discussion away from wives for the rest of the trip. Just before six, they turned off Route 17 and onto a local road, and twenty minutes later they were pulling up at the entrance to the bungalow colony.

New tension sprouted in him at the moment of arrival. His hands felt icy. He clenched his fists. It seemed to him, wildly, that Ellen would be able to read his face and know what he had done. The moment he saw her, she would look up at him and nod, and say, "You've been sleeping with Janice Keller, haven't you? Don't try to deny it, Dave. It's written all over your face in letters an inch high."

Of course she wouldn't say that, Hughes knew. But would she see it all the same? How well did she know her husband, anyway? Would she suspect?

He was frightened. But he forced himself not to panic. *Don't give away the show,* he thought. *Stay loose and you'll carry it off.*

With trembling fingers he unbuckled the safety belt and got ready for the moment of coming face-to-face with his wife.

The colony consisted of half a dozen good-sized and well-spaced bungalows situated in a sprawling

semicircle near a lake. The summer's rent was high, but not so high as any other eight-week vacation would have been.

The air was warm, but without any of the city's oppressive heat. Niles parked the car alongside the bungalow closest to the lake. Beth and Ellen and the children came trooping out to greet the newcomers. They all looked fine—Beth and Ellen wearing halters and shorts, the children swimsuits.

Hughes hesitated only a moment before opening his arms to Ellen. After a week of Janice, Ellen seemed a stranger to him. But he remembered his wits in time, put on a broad smile, wrapped his arms around his wife and hugged her and kissed her.

"Hello, darling," she murmured. "I've been counting the minutes all week."

"Has everything been all right?"

"Swell, Dave. You ought to see the kids in the water. Like a couple of greased eels. And we're all so tan. Has it been hot in the city?"

"Awful. Except for last night. We had some rain and it cooled things off."

"It rained here too," Ellen said. "Lightning and everything. We sat on the front porch and watched the show. Say, are you serious about wanting that swim before dinner?"

Hughes shook his head. "Not any more. It gets cooler here in the evenings than I thought. I'll just take a shower while you're getting supper ready."

He turned to kiss his sister and then all of the children, first his own, then his niece and nephew. All eight went inside. Within, the bungalow had a spacious, cheery look. With his wife by his side

and children all around, Hughes felt as though the passionate episodes of the past week were fantasies, torrid dreams and nothing more. *This* was real, Janice only an incubus haunting his sleep.

He went upstairs. The upper floor had two bedrooms and a bathroom. The kids were installed in one; he and Ellen would share the other. She followed him in.

"Shouldn't you be in the kitchen, wench?"

"I want to change out of my sunsuit," Ellen said. "It gets nippy here in the evenings. Take a look at your old lady, Dave!"

She opened the halter, took it off, and stepped out of her shorts and panties. Hughes saw that she had already acquired a nice tan; she was a pleasing golden brown except for the strips of white across her breasts and loins. And she had lost a little weight around the hips, too.

"Well? What do you think?"

"Lovely," Hughes forced himself to say. "Hurry up and get dressed before I get evil ideas."

She laughed. Hughes turned away, distressed. She *was* a goodlooking woman, he thought, and not just goodlooking for her age. One week of sun and swimming had restored the youthful firmness of her skin; her breasts were high and full and inviting, her thighs sleek, her buttocks dimpled but still lovely.

Yet compared with Janice she was second-rate.

You looked at Ellen's breasts and you saw the ever-so-slight sag of a thirtyish woman who had had two children. You looked at Janice's breasts and you saw two swelling globes that had no need of any support.

You looked at Ellen's legs and you could see the blue veins of childbed. You looked at Janice's legs and all you saw were two twin white columns, flawless and breathtaking.

You looked at Ellen's body as a whole and you saw a goodlooking woman's body. You looked at Janice's nakedness and you saw something spectacular.

There was a difference, Hughes realized.

All the difference in the world.

He showered and dressed, and went downstairs. Beth and Ellen were fussing around in the kitchen, simultaneously trying to get the meal prepared, to keep the children under control, and to keep out of each other's way. Niles was standing on the porch, looking out at the snubby mountains on the far side of the lake. Hughes joined him.

"This is a hell of a swell place," Niles said. "Quiet—peaceful—cool. It's great to come up here after a week of batting your brains out."

"That it is," Hughes agreed.

"Beth and I could have afforded a different kind of vacation," Niles went on. "We could have gone to some country club for a couple of weeks. where all the women stand around in their mink stoles, and some dumb comic yaps at you every night, and—you know the kind of place. Well, to hell with that! Beth doesn't mind keeping house for herself. And when you suggested renting a place up here it was just what we wanted. Away from it all. Serene. And—hey. Get a load of that!"

Niles pointed down toward the lake. There had still been a few diehard swimmers in it, and now they

were coming out, a woman and a couple of children. The woman was about twenty-eight, perhaps. She wore a dark purple bathing-suit, tight-fitted. Her breasts were enormous, almost grotesque. The rest of her body was ample, but her breasts were out of proportion. Bigger even than Janice's: two spheres like small basketballs, jouncing and quivering with each step.

"That's something, eh?" Niles asked. "How'd you like to plough *that* pasture, Davey-boy?"

Hughes scowled. "It's just flesh."

"But *what* flesh! Beats Beth and Ellen combined, and they've got plenty!"

Hughes felt queasy. "You go for her, eh? I suppose you'll make a pass at her while we're here."

"Well, I didn't say that—"

"You will, though. But you can do better than that one, Mike. Remember that dairy-farm we passed half a mile back? I hear they've got a Holstein there with the biggest goddam udders in Sullivan County, and—" He turned away. Another moment and he would be in a fight.

"Listen, Hughes," Niles said roughly, grabbing his elbow. "You got a funny sense of humor, you know? I—"

"Dinner's served!" came Beth's cry from within.

Tension dissolved. They went inside.

The girls had outdone themselves. There was a magnificent roast turkey and Chablis from some mysterious source, and all the trimmings. Everyone ate with gusto, and the wine helped wash away the incident on the front porch. After dinner, Hughes played catch with Niles, Tony, and little Larry for

a while, and then it was time for all the children to go to sleep. Hughes spent a long while in the children's room, telling them an involved and endless story; Erika dozed off in the midst of it, but Tony remained awake, prodding him for more and more complications, until finally he, too, closed his eyes. Hughes tiptoed downstairs. To his mild surprise, he found a group of people on the porch—Beth, Ellen, Niles, and several people from the other bungalows. Including the young lady with the formidable bosom. She was wearing a tight red jersey that accentuated the misproportion of her figure; Hughes kept expecting her to tumble over from sheer topheaviness. He noticed Mike Niles staring hungrily at that oversize bosom, though. The bosom's owner was named Lorraine Bruson; her husband was a short, balding man in his late thirties, a commercial artist who seemed faintly embarrassed at being the proprietor of such a pair of balloons.

They were congenial people, though, and Bruson had plenty of liquor in his cabin, and the party was pleasant. They held it out on the front lawn, under the bright moonlight. Hughes kept his eye on his brother-in-law, and was not astonished to see Niles, drink in hand, talking eagerly and enthusiastically to Lorraine Bruson. Hughes was willing to wager a month's pay that before the weekend was out Niles would be fondling the contents of Mrs. Bruson's bra, and probably getting a good deal further than that.

About eleven, Ellen said, "I'm getting sleep, dear. Shall we go in?"

Hughes knew what she meant. He nodded, and they excused themselves from the party and went

upstairs. Ellen peeked into the children's room; all was well. Then they tiptoed into their own.

As they undressed, Ellen said, "Hurry, darling. It's been a whole week—"

"You aren't always this impatient, Ellen."

She smiled. "I've been thinking about things, dear. Mostly about how much I love you." She hung up her dress and slid past him into the bathroom. He finished undressing. She came out, getting into bed, and a few minutes later he turned out the light and joined her.

She pressed her body up against his. Automatically, his hand went to her breasts. He felt the stiff little nipples rising. She gasped, and began to move her body against his. After nine years, there was little need for communication between them. They moved easily into the rhythm of love.

"I love you, Dave," she whispered. "I love you so very much."

"I—love you too," he made himself say. Her body was warm and soft beneath his. Her lips clung to his, her hands gripped his shoulders. Faster they moved, faster and faster, experienced partners moving on toward a familiar culmination. But part of Hughes' mind was black with self-reproach. *If she had only been like this all the time,* he thought, *there would never have been any Janice. But there is a Janice. I can't have them both. God in heaven, what am I going to do? What am I ever going to do?*

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WEEKEND WENT WELL. Saturday morning, just before dawn, Ellen turned to him again in bed, and they made love a second time. Hughes could not remember when he and Ellen had last done it twice the same night. Four years ago? Five? Certainly it was before Erika had been born, possibly even before Tony.

The fresh country air did things to his appetite, and he put away a tremendous breakfast. After breakfast it was down to the lake for all of them; watching his son swim fearlessly and strongly toward the deep water, Hughes felt an unmistakable thrill of pride, and when Ellen squeezed his hand he squeezed back. Erika, too, had turned into a swimmer; she splashed around, elaborately careful to keep her eyes closed and her face out of the water, and gave promise of matching her brother's accomplishments before long. Larry Niles, at five, was not as good a swimmer as the slightly younger Erika, and this infuriated her father; for most of the morning Niles remained at the water's edge, trying to persuade his son to swim by a mixture of threats and bribes.

Hughes enjoyed the swim. He crossed the lake and back with Ellen and Beth; both women had blossomed out into attractive bikinis, and they were both good swimmers. Coming closer to shore, they had a water-fight, everyone laughing and splashing.

About ten that morning, Lorraine Bruson came down for a swim. She, too, was wearing a two-piece

swimsuit today: white trunks and a striped halter that seemed to be groaning under the weight of the two mammoth breasts it was called on to contain. She trotted down to the water, her bosom bouncing mightily, and waved hello.

The moment she arrived, Mike Niles lost all interest in teaching his son to swim. "It's your turn to watch the kids," he told Beth, and abruptly struck out for deep water. Ellen came up on shore, to stretch out in the sun. Hughes waded over to where Beth was, in knee-deep water surrounded by the children.

Beth looked beautiful, Hughes thought—certainly she had all the looks in the family, with her perfect build, her athletic body, her fine figure, her tanned skin. Her breasts rose steeply beneath the halter. She was a splendid-looking woman, Hughes thought. Any man who was married to her and couldn't be satisfied had to be out of his mind.

She was bending over, supporting Larry's stomach and trying to coax him to swim, when Hughes came up.

"Tighten your halter," he said. "Everything's showing, sis."

She looked up at him. "Always guarding my modesty, eh, Dave? Well, maybe I *want* to show a few things."

"Not to me."

"I'll let you know when I'm ready to go in for incest," she said. "No, I'm just putting them on general display."

The bitterness in her tone surprised him. "What are you talking about?"

She nodded toward the deep water. Niles and Lorraine Bruson were splashing around gaily out there. In a low voice she said, "Daddy's fascinated by those two big things that girl has. I'm just trying to remind him I've got a couple too."

"Mike's just fooling around," Hughes said.

"Fooling around, hell! He wants that pair of tits so bad he's drooling for them!" Beth blazed with sudden bitterness. "Dave, he *collects* them. His secret ambition is to have a trophy room lined with mounted breasts. And that's the finest pair he's ever seen."

Hughes tried to look bewildered. "Honey, I don't get you. Mike's a good husband, isn't he?"

Beth smiled. Waving Larry and Mindy away to play in the mud, she said, "Sit down next to me and listen. Mike's been cheating me for years. Practically from the beginning, Dave."

"And you've known?"

"Of course I've known. I'm no fool."

"You've never let on."

She shook her head. "No, I was always scared to tell anyone. But this past week, up here with Ellen, we've done a lot of talking. I've gotten to know Ellen for the first time since you married her, really. And we've helped each other."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we've shared some secrets. You and Ellen haven't been getting along too well in the past year or so, have you?"

"Things might have been better," Hughes conceded. "But what does this have to do with—"

"Ellen told me. She admits it's mostly her fault. She's lost interest in sex. She puts too much of her

energy into the kids, into the house, and she was shortchanging you. She realizes this now. I helped her realize it. Because I told her about Mike and me. What sort of husband Mike really is. And I warned her not to drive you into becoming that kind of husband."

"So *that's* why she was so affectionate last night!"

Beth nodded. "And it'll stay that way, because she'll see to it. Dave, she's a fine woman. Don't treat her badly. She wants so much to have you love her again."

"But you and Mike—"

"I never denied Mike anything!" Beth said bitterly. "I was always willing, whenever he wanted me. But he couldn't get enough. Every girl he saw, he wanted. He thought he was concealing it from me, but he wasn't, not at all."

Hughes looked solemnly at his sister. "Are you going to divorce him?"

Beth laughed. "Don't be silly! I've been married to him seven years. For the past six, I've known the truth about him. Why should I divorce him at this late date?"

"But—but he's unfaithful—"

"And rich."

You'd get the children and you'd get alimony," Hughes said. "You don't have to stick with him just for his money."

"I don't," Beth said in a strange voice. "Can't you see, Dave? I *love* him."

"After everything?"

"After everything. Look at the two of them, now.

Close together in the water. I'll bet he's got one hand in her halter and the other between her legs. But I love him, despite everything. When he's good to me, he's *very* good. I keep forgiving him."

"You're making a mistake."

"Maybe," she said. "But I can't help myself. Just don't *you* make any mistakes, Dave. Don't do anything that would break up what you and Ellen have. She's going to try hard to win your love back. Don't mess things up."

Hughes was silent. He wanted to burst out in rage, to roar that he *had* already messed things up, that Ellen's reformation had come a week too late. that he was fatally and inextricably involved with another woman. Not a quick breast-squeezing affair like the kind Mike Niles had, but something serious, something that couldn't be broken up without heartache and agony.

He could not speak.

He realized that he was even more evil than Mike Niles. Niles only deceived Beth with his body. He was deceiving Ellen with his heart.

He sat in the shallow water, alone now, for Beth had risen to run after Mindy before she waded out too far. After a moment he elbowed up and walked up on shore. Ellen lay face down on a blanket, the straps of her halter open to give her an even suntan on her back. He could just barely see the sides of her breasts, flattened beneath her body.

Turning, Hughes looked out into the water again. heard Lorraine Bruson's high-pitched giggle, saw Niles dive under the surface and reappear some ten feet behind her. It was not very hard to conjecture what

Niles might have done while he was under water. Lorraine Bruson seemed pleased by it, at any rate. Her husband, fishing from a boat at the far side of the lake, took no notice.

Hughes knelt over Ellen and put his cold hand down on her bare back.

"Ooohh—*don't!*"

"Guess who?"

"Don? Ned? Phil? Oscar? Cornelius?"

"Keep guessing," Hughes grinned.

"Mort? Ronnie? Clyde? Charlie? John?"

"That's enough."

"Wait," she said. "I can try a few more. Paul? Horace? Leon?"

Laughing, Hughes sprawled down on the blanket beside her, and put his hand over hers. She looked up, smiling, rising a couple of inches from the blanket. He clucked his tongue at her.

"Better not sit up any further. The Anti-Indecency League will arrest you."

"Let them. Hon, someday let's rent a whole lake," Ellen said. "Just the two of us. We'll board the kids at the vet, or something. And we won't have to worry about Anti-Indecency Leagues. We'll sunbathe in the raw all day long, and go skinny-dipping, and make love all night. How does that sound?"

"Like utopia," he said. He stretched out on his side, facing her. The only trouble, he thought, was that reality kept obtruding. The annoying reality that you couldn't just "rent a lake" as easily as all that, and the equally annoying reality that you couldn't board children the way you might board a spaniel or a pet cat. Ellen's parents lived in California; his were

dead. Their idyllic summer in the sun came with built-in problems.

And then there was Janice, too.

As he lay there, in the warm sun, with sweet fresh air in his lungs and the distant laughter of his children coming up from the lake, and his wife warm and almost naked at his side, Hughes felt happier than he had been in a long while. This was real relaxation, he thought. Some magic had been worked and Ellen was warm and loving again, and everything was wonderful, everything was magically perfect.

Except Janice.

And on Sunday he would return to New York, to Janice, to the other reality.

It seemed so easy to make the decision now. Of course he loved only Ellen; of course he would do nothing to break up his family. When he returned to the city on Sunday, he would talk to Janice, would tell her that he had come to his senses at last, that he had broken the shackles of fleshy lust that bound him to her. They would end it, and it would be an interlude, a weird intermezzo that he would never forget but which he would try never to think about in the future.

He rejoiced. His mind was made up. He and Janice had succumbed to temptation, but the time had come to end it. He belonged with Ellen.

A mood of complete ease stole over him, now that the problem was resolved. He lay pleasantly baking in the sun for a while, and then, half an hour later, returned to the water. Ellen decided that Tony and Erika had had enough, and she removed them, squalling and protesting, from the water. Beth took Larry

and Mindy out, too. Hughes swam out to the deep water, heading toward Niles and Lorraine, who by this time were nearly at the other side of the lake.

As Hughes drew near, he was treated to an unexpected sight. Lorraine had been bobbing with just her head and shoulders above the water, but she came suddenly to a shallow area in the lake, and to her own surprise found herself above water almost to the waist.

And she had removed her halter.

Hughes took one look, then pretended not to have seen, and she replaced the missing halter quickly. But the image was imprinted permanently on Hughes' brain of two monumental breasts, two heroic breasts that seemed to begin just below her chin and curve outward and in almost to her midsection. So clever Niles had managed to work the bra off her in the water, and she had been taken by surprise by the rise in the bottom! But her bosom was phenomenal. Hughes thought. Why, the dark area ringing her nipples was greater than the entire breasts of some women!

Hughes swam up. She was not sure whether he had seen or not, and she evidently intended to carry on as though he hadn't.

"Hello, Dave," she called.

"Hello, Lorraine." Last night everyone had gotten onto a first-name basis.

"I've just been having the most fascinating conversation with your brother-in-law out here," she said. "All about the television industry. Some of the things he's been telling me—they're absolutely incredible!"

"I'll bet," Hughes remarked.

Niles said, "Did Beth go in?"

"Uh-huh. She and Ellen decided the kids had had enough swimming for the morning."

"What time is it?"

"Oh, about eleven," Hughes said. "They told me to let you know that they'll have lunch ready at noon."

"Thanks," Niles said absently. "Well, I guess I'll swim around a few more minutes, and then I'll go in. You don't have to wait for me if you don't want to, Dave."

It was more than a hint: it was a command. Hughes had no interest in interfering with his brother-in-law's conquests. He turned and began to paddle himself toward shore.

Beth was preparing lunch, and Ellen was playing with the children behind the bungalow. Hughes waved to them and went upstairs to get into dry clothes. Upstairs, he glanced out the bedroom window and saw Lorraine Bruson coming up from the lake, walking slowly as though struggling under the burden of those junoesque breasts, and going into her bungalow. There was no sign of Niles.

Niles remained invisible for the next half hour, then showed up at the bungalow looking self-satisfied and content. Hughes wondered whether he had taken some back route to the Bruson bungalow. He was almost certain of it.

But he said nothing.

The rest of the day passed pleasantly enough; they cooked supper out, barbecuing some steaks and hamburgers over a charcoal fire, and after dinner, with the children stowed away, the residents of several of

the bungalows came together for a little cocktail party—apparently a Saturday night regular event here. Hughes noticed that his brother-in-law was paying no more than minimal polite attention to the bosomy Bruson woman. *And small wonder,* Hughes thought. *Mike already has had what he wants out of her. He has no further interest.*

Ellen was passionate again in bed that night; they thrashed about violently until Hughes was positive that the loud squealing of the bedsprings would certainly awaken the whole household. It was a memorable hour, even after a decade's familiarity.

The weather was cooler on Sunday. Hughes took a brief swim after breakfast; after lunch they had a badmitton foursome, the children watching, and then about three in the afternoon Niles suggested that they get on the road. "The traffic gets pretty thick around four-thirty. This way we can get a little bit of a jump."

Hughes agreed. It took twenty minutes to change and pack up, and then it was time for goodbyes. In their bedroom, Ellen kissed him long and warmly.

"So long, darling. Till next Friday."

"I'll phone you on Monday."

"Phone calls can't give me what I want," she grinned. "But call anyway."

By three-thirty, after farewells to Beth and the children, they were on the road. Niles drove more adventurously than usual, as though buoyed up by helium.

"God damn," he said. "What a fantastic pair of knockers!"

"Bruson?"

"Who else? Christ, Dave, could you blame me?

I know, you think I'm dirt. I haven't forgotten your cow remark, and I guess I deserved it. But maybe you don't understand what it's like to be in the grip of—of a compulsion. The moment I saw that dame, I had to have her. *Had* to."

"I know all about compulsions," Hughes said quietly. "Well? Did you make her, at least?"

"Uh-huh. Saturday morning, just before lunch."

"I thought so. You had her bra off in the water, didn't you?"

"She thought you saw it. She wasn't sure."

Hughes nodded. "I saw. Just for a moment. I have to admit she's built."

"Incredible. And not sloppy, either. Big and firm and hard ones. It's something glandular, I guess. She said they grew that big when she was thirteen."

"I suppose you went into the bushes?"

"In her bungalow," Niles said. "I went around the back way."

"Suppose her husband caught you?"

"She said that when he goes fishing he stays out all day. Besides, he wouldn't raise a fuss. She says he's impotent." Niles chuckled. "Believe me, I've got a steady thing all summer, if Beth doesn't catch wise. Christ, I'd like to get a photo of that pair, just for posterity!"

Hughes remembered what Beth had said. *He'd like to collect breasts. Mount them in his trophy room.*

"Did Beth seem to notice?" Niles asked anxiously.

"She saw you fooling around her in the water, if that's what you mean."

"I think she knows," Niles said. "She doesn't

let on, but I'm sure she knows. I worry about that. Christ, I'd go crazy if Beth ever left me. I'd kill myself. But I can't help running after these dames. I'm all mixed up, Dave. I love Beth, but I cheat on her all the time. Maybe I ought to get a psychiatrist again."

Hughes said nothing. Niles' torments did not interest him just now. He was thinking about the return to the city, the return to Janice.

My mind is made up. I love Ellen. I'm ending things for good with Janice.

Noble resolution. Lofty decision. But something in his mind sneered at him. *Go ahead, wise guy. Actions speak louder than words. You'll be home in two hours. Let's see if you mean what you say.*

CHAPTER NINE

TRAFFIC THICKENED UP RAPIDLY on Route 17, and despite Niles' jet-pilot style of driving it took better than three hours to get back to New York City. Niles was close to a wreck by the end of the trip, fuming with frustration because he had been compelled to crawl along at twenty and thirty miles an hour for long stretches. Hughes would have suggested taking over the driving to ease the strain on the other man's nerves, but he knew there was no point in making the suggestion. Short of the point of collapse, Niles would never surrender the wheel of his pet car.

A damp fog wrapped around them as they entered Manhattan. It was another hot day in the city, up close to ninety. The men said little to each other. Niles drove silently Queensward.

It was quarter to seven when the Chrysler pulled up in front of Dave Hughes' house. Hughes dragged his suitcase out of the back seat.

"See you next Friday," he said.

"How about lunch again during the week?"

Hughes shrugged. "I'll see. Phone me later on in the week and we can work something out, Mike."

"Right."

The big car glided away. Hughes trudged into the house, pausing in the lobby to clean out the mailbox. Bills, mostly. Invitations to subscribe to magazines at fantastic reductions. A two-color flyer asking him if he wanted to buy a mink coat at summer prices. He culled out the junk, dropped it in the wastebasket

near the mailboxes, and moved on toward the elevator. He didn't think he wanted a mink coat, not now or ever.

The elevator was waiting. Hughes rode upstairs, went down the hall, and quietly opened the door of his apartment. With great care he closed the door without slamming it, and flipped the bolt. He knew why he was being so quiet. It was to avoid letting Janice know that he was home. He wanted to postpone as long as possible that moment of reckoning that he had resolved on.

The long trip had left him grimy and sweat-soaked. He put the suitcase down and began to unbutton his shirt. A good cold shower now would be just the thing, he thought. And then a drink, and then he would go across and have it out with Janice.

We've got to call it quits right here and now, he would tell her. *We have nothing to gain from what we're doing except tragedy. We musn't fool ourselves into thinking that ours is a great love. It's nothing more than a simple mutual case of hot pants. And I discovered this past weekend that my family means so much to me that I could never consider—*

The doorbell rang, interrupting the silent rehearsal. Frowning. Hughes buttoned his shirt again and moved toward the door. He peeked out.

Janice.

His hands shook as he opened the door. She smiled up at him, all sweet-smelling and young and alive, and stepped into the apartment without waiting to be asked.

"Welcome home, darling. I thought this weekend was going to last forever!"

"Janice, I—"

Don't say a thing. Not a thing."

She came up to him, on tiptoe, and put her arms around his neck, lifting one leg off the floor and thrusting her body hard against his. Her lips touched his, delicately at first, and then more fiercely as her pent-up hunger for him exploded.

Despite himself, he kissed back. Hard.

She stepped away again. She was wearing a man's blouse with the shirt-tails tied in a knot just below her breasts, leaving about six inches of midriff bare above a pair of black toreador pants that outlined every contour and cleft of her anatomy. Her breasts were rising and falling rapidly with growing excitement.

She smiled and said, "I've had a busy weekend while you were gone. Come next door and see."

She took him by the hand. Numbly, Hughes allowed himself to be led across the hall into her apartment. The phrases of his little speech tumbled brokenly through his mind, but he was unable to voice them. *Got to call it quits . . . nothing to gain . . . hot pants . . . my family means so much . . . could never consider . . .*

"Look!" Janice cried.

There was an array of things on the livingroom couch. Four phonograph records, some books, a bottle of wine, a heap of clothing. Hughes shook his head uncertainly, not knowing what to make of the display.

"Mozart's *Posthorn Serenade,*" she said, picking up the records one by one. "Brahms' Fourth. The Schubert Trio Number One. And Beethoven's Piano

Concerto Number Four. All the pieces you were telling me I ought to listen to, last week." She held up the books. "I sort of went on a book-buying binge too. Kafka—Thomas Mann—Five Greek Tragedies—" She waved the bright paperbacks about in glee. "And look here," she said. "Chateau Lafite wine, to go with our steak tomorrow night. I asked the man in the liquor store for the best red wine he had. I won't even tell you how much it cost. And here," she finished, scooping up the clothes. "I bought a few things that you'd like me better in. A shorty nightgown that's so sexy I'm ashamed to put it on—and look at this bikini. Do you think they'll let me on the beach in it? These pedal-pushers are new, too. And—"

"Hold on," Hughes said dazedly. "Did you just inherit a million bucks?"

"All this cost me only $85," Janice said. "And I hadn't spent any money on myself in ages. I was so lonely for you that I just had to go out and buy things. Things that we could enjoy together. Buying things cheers me up, you know. Especially when I bought them with you in mind all the time. Oh, and I forgot—"

She bustled pass him, into the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator. "Look what else!" she called, holding up a cocktail shaker. "I bought some gin and vermouth and a shaker, also some decent glasses for drinking cocktails. And I mixed a batch of martinis last night. Come on. Let's celebrate your homecoming!"

She was pouring out martinis, pressing the glass into his hand, clinking with him. Still stunned, he put the glass to his lips automatically, and took a sip.

"How is it?" she asked anxiously. "It's the right proportion and all, isn't it? I tried so hard—"

"It's fine," he said vaguely. He shook his head. "This is all quite a surprise, Jan. I don't know what to say. I'm—well, surprised."

He sat down and put one hand to his forehead. He thought of how she had spent the weekend, probably planning every minute new ways to please him. This beautiful girl, alone here, scheming to please *him*. And his mind full of crumbling speeches about how their affair was nothing but a case of mutual hot pants, and ought to be ended as quickly as possible.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I'm—not sure."

"You look so troubled, Dave. Aren't you pleased by all this?"

There was a lump in his throat. "I'm—terribly pleased, Jan. Just that it was so much of a surprise, walking in and finding all these things. I don't know what to say, really."

"Say that you love me, if you don't know what else to say."

He looked down at the floor, troubled. All of his fine resoultions were smashed. *Say that you love me.* The words would not rise to his lips. He scowled, hating himself for a weakling. From Friday night to Sunday afternoon, he had rejoiced in his family's bosom. The situation had all seemed so simple, then. Of *course* he loved only Ellen. Of *course* there was no question of continuing this thing with Janice. He would merely explain the situation to Janice, and that would be that.

But it was a lot less simple now.

Now that he sat in her apartment, with the things she had bought to delight him strewn out all around, with the drink she had lovingly made for him in his hand. With her large round breasts dancing before his eyes. With her firm buttocks, sheathed in tight black fabric, within reach of his groping hand.

"You're all upset," she said. "I know. It's because you saw your children and Ellen. Tell me about your weekend. No, don't tell me," she said hurriedly. "I don't want to know what you did. I don't want to know if you made love to your wife or not. I just want you to love me, Dave. Do you still love me?"

"I—don't know. I'm all mixed up, Jan."

"I was afraid this would happen. I was afraid you'd go up there and she'd make you forget me. Dave, you didn't stop loving me, did you? I couldn't sleep all weekend, worrying about you."

He drained his glass and put it down. He buried his face in his hands. "Jan, I don't know what to say. I came back full of all kinds of lofty resolutions. I was going to end this affair of ours."

"No, Dave!"

"But—but I can't." He looked up at her, his face tormented. In a hollow whisper he said, "When I was up there, I knew I belonged with *her*. But—now that I'm here—"

"You still love me!" she said.

He shrugged. "What does love mean, Janice?"

"You know the answer." She sat down next to him on the couch. She took his hand, holding it in her two small ones, and then she put it on her throat, pressing it against the beginning rise of her breasts, and thrust it suddenly into her blouse. She had no

bra on. One breast, large and warm and firm, swelled against his palm, the nipple hard and stiff. A sudden lance of desire went through him, and he knew there was no ending this now.

She leaned against him, and he held her breast, squeezing it, kneading it, until she began to gasp, and her hand went to the tails of the shirt and undid the knot, and she opened the buttons quickly. The blouse fell away, and she was naked to the waist. The big globes of her breasts seemed almost transparent, with the faint tracery of veins beneath the ivory surface, and the little nipples standing up like sentinels. She rose, unzipping her pants, and stood before him. He rolled the pants down, slowly, for they were very tight, and they came past her hips and over the generous mounds of her buttocks, and he kissed the warm flesh and pulled them the rest of the way down. She had nothing on beneath the pants. She turned, her eyes slitted and veiled with desire, and knelt on the floor before him, fumbling with his trouser belt.

Her lovemaking was almost savage. Her short fingernails raked his back, her heels dug deeply into the backs of his thighs as her body gripped his. The intensity of their coming together was such that the act itself was over almost at once, and they lay together, breathing harshly, exhausted on the floor. After a while he separated himself from her and went into the bathroom.

A guilty face looked back at him from the mirror.

I told you so, the mocking voice said within his brain. *You can't resist her. All she has to do is put your hand in her blouse and you fall apart.*

He came out. Janice was lying where he had

left her, on the floor, her eyes closed, a smile of contentment on her face. She looked like a satisfied kitten. Hughes stood over her, looking down at her rounded sleekness. Drained temporarily of desire, he could view her as objectively as though she were a statue.

She's lovely, he thought. *Irresistible.*

She opened her eyes and extended one hand. "Pull me up, darling."

He tugged her to her feet. He kissed her, lightly, not wanting to kindle the all-consuming flame again. She grinned and skipped past him into the john.

"Hungry?" she asked when she came out.

"Not very."

"It's late. You ought to have something. I've got some franks in the fridge, and we can open a can of beans, and there's some beer—"

"Fine idea," he agreed.

So they had a simple supper, and afterward they played the Brahms and the Schubert, and he explained to her why chamber music was so interesting, and when they tired of listening to records she modelled some of her new clothes, and after that they read for a while. Suddenly it was eleven o'clock. Hughes looked nervously at his watch.

"Tomorrow's a working day. I ought to get some sleep. So should you."

She tugged at his wrist. "Sleep here tonight, darling. I want to show you my nightie. And I want you next to me in bed."

He shook his head. "I've told you why, Jan. Suppose one of the kids got sick during the night. God forbid, suppose there was a fire up there. Ellen

would try to reach me at three in the morning, and I wouldn't be there. I couldn't tell her I was out bowling in the middle of the night, could I?"

"You could tell her you were next door sleeping with me," Janice said slyly.

"I'll tell her about us in my own way, in my own time," Hughes said in a measured voice. "But I can't stay here overnight."

"Then let me come sleep in your apartment."

"No. I—" He stopped.

"Nobody's going to phone *me* at three in the morning, Davey. You're just being superstitious about the marriage bed again. What for? We've already made love *on* it. Why can't I sleep *in* it, now? Or don't you love me?"

"What does that have to do with—"

"If you love me, you'll let me sleep in your bed tonight."

Hughes made a few feeble objections, but he knew he was defeated. At length he said, "All right. I'll leave the door ajar. Get whatever you need and come over in five minutes."

He went into his apartment and began to prepare for bed. Exactly five minutes later Janice entered, smiling impishly. She was carrying the flimsy nightgown and a toothbrush, nothing more.

He showered, and when he came out Janice was in the nightgown already. It was pink and transparent, and came down only to her hips, and he could see everything underneath it. She held up a bit of gauzy cloth and said, laughing, "Panties come with it. Should I put them on or not?"

"Don't bother," he said.

She did a pirouette, and the breeze picked up the hem of the nightgown and lifted it above her waist, showing him her buttocks and loins. "I didn't think you'd want it," she giggled. "How do I look in the almost-nude?"

"Ravishing."

"Come ravish me, then."

"Have mercy on an old man."

"Go on, Methusaleh!" she jeered. "You keep telling me you're old and I'll start believing it. But isn't this a sexy gown? The books say that it's much more erotic to appear *almost* naked than totally naked. How do I look?"

"Good enough to eat."

"Why don't you, then?"

"Some other time," Hughes said. He turned off the light. She bounded into bed a second ahead of him.

"That's true, isn't it?" she asked worriedly. "About total nudity being less exciting than partial concealment?"

"That's what they say," Hughes told her. "A girl in a garter-belt and a pair of nylons drives some men into fits, and the same girl in her birthday suit leaves them cold."

"How about you?"

"I'm not fussy."

"You ought to be. Wait till you see me in my bikini! Talk about near-nudity! I think I'll save it, though. For a time when you're tired of me, Davey, and I have to get you interested in my body again. That's when I'll start hiding critical areas. And you'll be curious."

"I will not. I know what you've got."

"You'll be curious all the same. You'll want to see if I have any more."

"We'll see," Hughes said. "Let's get some sleep. It's late, and tomorrow's Monday."

"I hate Mondays."

"Everyone does, chicken." He rolled over on his side, facing her, and found the hem of her nightgown and slid his hand up, past her loins, up the smooth softness of her belly, to her breasts. Cupping the lowermost mound, he murmured, "Good night."

"That's all? Just good night?"

"I'm not a sex machine, honey."

She laughed. "Any time you want me, I'm here."

"I'll remember that."

He fell asleep quickly. But, during the night, it began to rain, and the pattering of the drops against the window half-woke him. He stretched out a hand, felt it come in contact with buttocks and thighs, and for a moment he thought it was Ellen in his bed, until he remembered. Janice stirred sleepily and murmured, "I love you."

Desire rose in him, unexpected. He put his body to hers, and heard her emit a sound very much like a purr, and he began to move gently, dreamily, and she moved too, and a little while later he heard her deep-throated murmur of completion, and it was over, and as strangely as it had begun it had ended and he dropped easily back to sleep, his body still joined to hers.

Morning came. Janice was fantastically lively and buoyant the moment the first beams of light awakened her. Hughes was always a slow riser, and

he was particularly leaden this morning. But her good spirits seemed contagious. She was wandering around the kitchen, brewing coffee and trying to find the breakfast dishes, while he was still groping his way out of bed and into the bathroom.

Breakfast was good: orange juice, bacon and eggs, toast, coffee. At quarter to eight Janice rose from the table. "I hate to dump you with the dishes, darling, but I've got to run. Boss expects me in the store by eight-thirty at the latest."

Hughes kissed her, and finished cleaning up himself. He could move at a leisurely pace, since he had risen earlier than usual. He tried not to worry about the Janice-versus-Ellen problem now. Irrationally, he hoped that everything would somehow take care of itself.

He was at the office by ten to nine, hard at work, unusually cheerful for a Monday. At quarter past nine his telephone rang.

"Hughes."

"Mike here, Dave."

At this hour? Hughes wondered. "Is something wrong?" he asked hurriedly. "You never call so early. Is there trouble up at the lake, Mike? What—"

"I was just curious," Niles said slowly.

"Curious?"

"That's right," Niles said. "Tell me something, Dave. Who's that busty blonde you're shacking with?"

CHAPTER TEN

THE RECEIVER NEARLY FELL from Hughes' suddenly numb hands. He tried to keep his voice level as he said, "What are you talking about, Mike?"

"You know goddam well. Don't try to play innocent, Dave. You old hypocrite, giving me those frigging lectures on fidelity! I saw her clear as day, looking out your window. A naked blonde girl with big knockers. Christ, Dave, I practically couldn't sleep, I was so amazed by that sight."

"Take it slow," Hughes said. "You saw—"

"A naked blonde. Last night, around eleven. I was all worked up, you know. About not playing straight with Beth, and a lot of things like that. I couldn't relax. I was having trouble with my conscience, and I figured I'd get in the car and drive over to my old brother-in-law Dave's place and sit up over a bottle of rye and talk half the night. I wanted your advice." Niles chuckled. "I wanted to learn your secret, how you stay faithful to Ellen, you know? So I parked the car in front of your house and I happen to look up at the third floor windows and there's your window and there's this blonde in it. I almost had a stroke. Listen, Dave, I want to know all about it. How long has it been going on? Who is she? Why were you playing so coy last weekend? What—"

"I can't talk about things like this here," Hughes broke in. "Want to meet me for lunch?"

"Sure."

"Outside the Exec, then, around twelve. See you then."

"Right," Niles said, and hung up.

Hughes put the phone gingerly down. There was a chill in the pit of his stomach, and he felt shaky, as though a bomb had just exploded within ten feet of his desk.

Mike knows!

Hughes thumbed his eyeballs wearily. There was no way to lie out of this, he knew. Mike had seen her—whatever wildness had possessed Janice to walk to the window last night?—and there was no choice but to take Niles into his confidence, now.

The rest of the morning was chaotic. Hughes was totally unable to concentrate. People drifted past his desk and were greeted or not, depending on whether his mind happened to be focussed on the outside world at the moment. He made a hopeless botch of a simple accounting, and had to tear the sheet up and begin all over again—and he was halfway down the second sheet when he realized he had done it all wrong once more. He gave up, turned what fragment of attention he could muster to simpler, more routine work that normally took up no more than a tenth of his mind, and found himself unable to master even that this morning. He took an extra-long coffee break, alone, and spent much time in the washroom. At last it was fifteen minutes to twelve, and he could decently leave the office. He had not accomplished a thing all morning.

Niles was waiting eagerly in front of the restaurant; he had the look of a ferret about to pounce. And with reason: he was always greedily avid about

gobbling up some new revelatory tidbit about the inconsistency of human nature.

When they were at a table, Hughes said, "Now, you say you saw a girl at my window—"

"Don't try to blur things, Dave. I *saw* her. I was standing in the street, and I have good eyes, and I know which your windows are. I looked up to the third floor, near the corner of the building, and I saw a girl looking out your livingroom window. She was naked to the waist, I can guarantee that much. She was leaning on the ledge, looking out, and I saw her breasts." Niles leaned forward expectantly, triumphantly. "I didn't want to come upstairs, naturally, after that. I got back into my car and sat around watching to see what would happen. The lights went out in around five minutes. I drove home. I sat up half the night chewing my nails and wondering what the hell you were up to."

"Can't you guess?"

"It wasn't an hallucination, then?"

Hughes shook his head. "Your eyes were playing no tricks at all."

"Who is she, man?"

"How much can I trust you?"

Niles looked indignant. "After all I've confided in you? Listen, Dave, you know enough to blow my marriage to smithereens. We're in a Mexican standoff when it comes to jeopardizing each other. Tell me who she is."

Hughes sighed heavily. "She's a neighbor. Her apartment is right across the hall."

"Married?"

Hughes nodded. "Her husband's in the army.

Stationed in California. He gets out in six months or thereabouts. She's twenty-two."

"Christ almighty," Niles muttered incredulously. "So all this time you were handing me a line! You pious bastard, you! How long has this been going on, anyway?"

"Since a week ago Saturday."

"You're kidding! That's *all*?"

"I didn't even know her first name, two weeks ago," Hughes said. "Things happened fast."

"They sure did. The day Ellen went away! And then last Monday you sat right here and told me solemnly you had never cheated," Niles said reproachfully. "You were lying to me, man."

"I know. But she's the first. Absolutely the first, Mike. You've got to believe that."

Niles shrugged. "Okay, she's the first. She's young and she's stacked. Welcome to the fold, brother. You too can step out on your wife! But I thought you were happy with Ellen."

"I wasn't. We were—drifting apart."

"You mean she wasn't coming across in bed?" Niles asked bluntly.

"Put it that way if you want," Hughes said, toying with his napkin. "I—wanted to get even with Ellen, somehow. And this girl just sort of stumbled into my life. That first night, last Saturday, things happened magically. We clicked. We've been going at it pretty strong ever since then."

"I'll bet you have. Well, well, well. Is she a good lay?"

Scowling, Hughes said, "Mike, you don't understand. I'm in love with her."

The color left Niles' face. His jaw sagged. "You're —*what?*"

"Last night, when I got home from the country, I was set to tell her it was all off, that we had had our fun and now it was time to quit. Only—I couldn't. I couldn't tell her. I—love her."

"Holy mother," Niles exclaimed. "Are you going to marry her? What about Ellen—the kids—"

Hughes shook his head miserably. "I don't know," he said in a dry voice.

"When you step out, you step out all the way, huh, Dave? Me, I just fool around a little, grab off a piece whenever I can. You have to go fall in love!"

"Believe me, I didn't want it to be this way."

"What the hell are you going to do, then? In seven weeks Ellen comes home. Are you going to carry this titty little blonde along and dump her then? Or are you going to tell Ellen it's quits?"

"I don't know what I'll do."

"Take a word from me," Niles said. "Don't just sit on your rear and look worried. Think ahead. There's an explosion coming. You've got to plan for it. What does the girl want out of this?"

"She loves me, she says. She wants to marry me."

"And the husband?"

"A bruiser. She thinks he might kill her if she tells him he's had it."

Niles' frown deepened. "Boy, are *you* in a mess! Who knows about this so far?"

"Just you—I hope."

"Nosey neighbors?"

"A few. But I'm not worried. Some friends of Ellen's and mine saw us together in a restaurant, but

I told them she was my cousin from Cleveland, and I think they believed it."

"You hope." Niles sliced viciously into a roll. "You can't make up your mind whether to stick with Ellen or get hooked up with your blonde tail, is that it? Look, Dave, let me give you some free advice. Mind?"

"Of course not."

Niles tapped his knife on the edge of the plate. "Make up your mind that you're not smitten with love. Keep laying this blonde, if you can't get enough from Ellen. But forget the idea of marrying her. And when Ellen gets back from the country, drop the blonde cold. *Cold*. Smile at her in the elevator, yes, but not the sort of smile that says you know how many freckles she has on her butt. A distant smile. And stick with Ellen. You've got good kids; don't bust up their world."

"What about Janice's world?"

"She's got a husband, and from what you say he's not the sort of guy you want to get mixed up with. Take it from me, Dave, and I've been through this sort of thing a whole lot of times: taper her off, get the marriage ideas out of her head."

"That's easy to say."

"I never said it was easy to do. But you'll *have* to. Otherwise you'll lose Ellen and the kids and most of your friends and maybe your job, too. You'll be slaving to support Ellen the rest of your life, because she won't remarry. And you're likely to get your head caved in by the blonde's husband, which will settle your alimony problems but won't do your health any good. "Look," Niles said, "this past week-

end I met a girl, this Lorraine."

"That isn't the same thing," Hughes objected.

"How do you know? Okay, she has tremendous tits. Maybe that's what I've yearned for all my life—a pretty woman with a 45-inch bust. Do you see me mooning in my beer over her? Am I giving up Beth and the kids for her? Hell, no. I laid her on Saturday, and if I can manage it I'll lay her next Saturday too. That's as far as I get myself involved. Maybe it's not gentlemanly, but it's not dangerous either. Unless Beth finds out, that is. But I think she figures I'm faithful, or else I wouldn't fool around the way I do in public."

For a moment, Hughes wanted to tell him, to hurl the words across the table. *You aren't fooling Beth one bit, Niles. She knows all about your affairs, and she's known right from the start. She sticks by you because of your kids and because you give her a good life and because she's crazy enough to think she still loves you. But you aren't putting a thing over on her.*

He remained silent, though, because to let Niles know of Beth's awareness would be to sacrifice his one trump card. Niles would keep quiet about him because he was afraid of being exposed himself. Take away the counterweight and Niles might do anything, even try to seduce Ellen himself, as a reward for tipping her off. Hughes knew just how completely unprincipled his brother-in-law was. He didn't dare make himself vulnerable to Niles.

After a moment he said, "You've been a great help to me, Mike. I appreciate this."

"Nothing at all. You've helped me sometimes

too."

"I can count on you to keep mum?"

"Sure, man. And you'll ease off this lovesmitten bit a little?"

"I'll try."

"You *better* try. The blonde may be a good lay, but you don't want to lose Ellen for her."

After lunch, they parted quickly; Hughes walked the ten blocks down to his office in far better spirits than he had left the office in at noon. He plunged into his work with gusto, undoing much of the chaos of the morning and catching up a bit on the backlog that had accumulated during the day. When he drove home, he was practically cheerful again.

He reached the house at twenty-five to six. Janice was home already; there was a note on the door that said, *Ring my bell when you come in.*

He rang it. Janice came to the door wearing the bikini. At first, he thought she was nude; all she wore was a flesh-colored strip across her breasts, and a tiny kerchief around her hips.

"You like?" she asked.

"Plenty. But you'll get arrested if you wear it at Coney Island."

Her eyes sparkled. "It's wonderful indoors in hot weather, though. I can't run around naked because my backside sticks to the chairs when I sit down. But this way—"

"I see," Hughes said. "Look, it's Monday and I've got to phone Ellen."

"Okay, but hurry back. We'll have martinis and then I'll put the steak up." She gave him a playful wink and closed the door on him.

The telephone call to Ellen was brief. The weather up there was splendid, she told him. The children were fine, everything was fine. She was looking forward to next Friday, she said. Eagerly.

They chatted on for a minute more, and then the call ended. Everything normal there, it seemed. He hung up his jacket and went back to Janice's apartment.

When he pushed the door open she was buzzing around lithely, getting supper ready. The sight of her, all but nude in the skimpy bikini, tightened his throat. The lovely swells of her breasts were clearly revealed by the inadequate halter, while the loincloth was cut so sharply that several inches of buttocks were visible, and little golden curls of hair peeked out at the sides of the triangular kerchief. She had done it deliberately, testing the theory, and she was right: she was infinitely more desirable and tempting this way than in complete nudity.

He looked away, remembering his brother-in-law's advice. *Forget the idea of marrying her. When Ellen gets back from the country, drop the blonde cold. The blonde may be a good lay, but you don't want to lose Ellen for her.*

Janice emerged from the kitchen bearing two crystal-clear martinis. "Here, darling. I even found out you were supposed to chill the glasses beforehand, so I put them in the fridge before I left this morning."

He took the drink from her, sipped it, put it down. He said slowly, "If you're ever in my apartment again, Janice, don't go near the windows. Or at least put some clothing on if you do."

"What?"

"Last night, while I was in the shower and you were getting undressed—did you walk over to the window and look out?"

She frowned. "Well—yes, yes, I did. I wanted to see what sort of view you had."

"And what were you wearing?"

"Just my pants, I guess. But—my God, did somebody see me?"

Hughes nodded. "My brother-in-law Mike."

"The television writer?"

"Uh-huh, the television writer. He had insomnia and wanted to pay me a visit. So he parked in front of the house and started to come upstairs, only he looked up first, and there was a blonde in my window without any clothes on. A blonde with big tits, he said. He puts things so quaintly."

Janice reddened. Suddenly she seemed more than naked in the bikini. "He—told you this?"

Hughes took a deep pull of his martini. "He had lunch with me today, and told me. We don't have to worry about him, though—I've got so much dope on *him* that he'd never dream of telling Ellen. Even if he had any motive for informing on me. But still, it was carelessness, Jan. We mustn't take risks like that. For God's sake, don't go wandering around with everything showing where other people can see you!"

Janice smiled strangely. "I have nothing to be afraid of, Dave. I don't mind if the whole world knows we're living together."

"But—Jan, don't be silly!" Hughes spluttered. "We can't just go—*flaunting* ourselves—"

"Why not?" she challenged.

"Because—because—"

"Dave, let's be sensible. You love me, I love you. I hate to say it like this, but it's bigger than both of us. We never expected it to happen this way, but it did. All right. The world will have to find out sooner or later. I admit it's a little out of propriety to show myself off in the window, but I didn't think anyone could see, and anyway it won't happen again. But you've got to start thinking seriously of letting Ellen know. Maybe your brother-in-law can help tell her."

He shook his head. "It would hurt her so much."

"I'm sure of that. But she'll have to find out sooner or later, darling. We have to tell her first, so we can be prepared when Nick comes back."

Hughes knotted his fists together in frustration. He seemed unable ever to tell Janice what he had resolved to tell her. *Drop her. Don't lose Ellen. Don't hurt the kids. This is just a summertime affair, hot-pants stuff, not an eternal romance.*

He couldn't say it.

The moment came, and then he knew it was gone, and he had not said it. Janice still assumed he planned to divorce Ellen and marry her, and he had said nothing to contradict that assumption.

Nothing.

You're a stinking heel, he thought bitterly. *A lousy vacillating slimy worm.*

Hollowly he said, "You keep pushing me, Jan. You've got to give me time. Time to think this out. I've been married nine years, you know. I can't decide overnight how I'm going to tell my wife."

"We don't have that much time. Only seven more weeks."

"I'll figure something out," he promised desperately. Suddenly wild desire blotted out everything else; if he could only have her body now, it would take away the need to think, to brood, to fear. He reached for her and quickly opened the hook of her halter. It fell away. The proud fullness of her breasts loomed before him, breathtaking. shiny with sweat. He pulled her to him, buried his face in those two soft silken mounds, caught her hard nipples gently between his lips and kissed them.

His hands glided down her back, under the skimpy loincloth, over the soft roundness of her buttocks. He began to undo the little kerchief.

"I haven't put the steak up yet," she protested. "Dinner will be late—"

He laughed. "Let it be late," he said. "This is more important right now."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LATER THAT EVENING, HUGHES RETURNED to his apartment to get a phonograph record, and he discovered that the telephone was ringing. He gulped in sudden fright and snatched it up quickly.

Dan Hyman was calling.

"Martha and I thought we'd invite you over for dinner tomorrow night," Hyman told him. "She pities you because you have to shift for yourself with Ellen away, and anyhow it's a coon's age since you were last here. How about it? You free tomorrow?"

"Well," Hughes began uncertainly—

"Don't tell me you'll be out escorting that cousin of yours again, Dave!"

"No, that's not it," Hughes said. "I'm just trying to remember if—" Sweat began to break out on him. *What if they're trying to test me?* he wondered. *Well, I won't give them any satisfaction.* "Come to think of it," he said, "I *am* free tomorrow night."

"Swell!"

"What time do you want me?"

"How's about half past six?" Hyman asked. "And will roast chicken do?"

"It'll do just fine," Hughes told him. "Thanks for the invite, Dan."

"Oh, don't mention it. We know how hard it must be for an old married man like you to have to batch it during the week. See you tomorrow."

"Right. See you tomorrow."

Scowling, Hughes hung up, found the record he

had come in to get, and went back to Janice's. She noticed the expression on his face at once.

"Something wrong?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I got a phone call from Dan Hyman while I was over there."

"The fellow we met in the restaurant that night?"

"The very same. He invited me to come over for dinner tomorrow night. Felt sorry for me because I was a summer bachelor, you know. And then he tossed in a little remark about would I be out escorting my cousin instead? I didn't want to get involved making excuses, so I accepted the invitation."

"So I won't see you tomorrow night?" Janice said, her face clouding immediately. "Darling, it isn't fair to let someone else invite you—"

"Whoa! Baby, I've still got to keep up appearances. If an old friend invites me, and I turn it down, it looks fishy."

"*Let* it look fishy," she said petulantly. "I don't want to do without you for one minute more than I absolutely have to."

"I'll be home early," he promised.

"You'd better be.

She snuggled against him, holding him tight.

The next evening, he was home at the usual time, and after freshening himself up for his visit he stopped off at Janice's place. As though deliberately stressing the fact that he was neglecting her tonight, she looked washed-out and shabby, with uncombed hair, no makeup, and shapeless, faded clothes. She kissed him sourly.

"What time will you be home?"

"Is this an inquisition?"

She laughed. "No, darling. Just a sign of impatience, that's all."

"I'll try to escape by ten."

"Okay. I'll do my sewing or something while I'm waiting."

"Poor Jan. Abandoned by her heartless lover," he laughed.

He drove quickly over to the Hymans' place. They lived in an attractive two-story home in Kew Gardens Hills. Hyman was an insurance broker, moderately well-to-do, who believed in living well. Hughes pulled his car into their driveway, and by the time he had come all the way up onto the porch Martha Hyman had opened the door and was smiling at him. She was a tall, big-boned woman, slightly older than her husband, and pretty in a rugged sort of way.

"Hello, Dave. Right on time, as always."

"As always, Martha. It was swell of you to take pity on a poor temporary bachelor," Hughes said, as she led him inside. The house was expensively furnished. Cocktail music was coming from an awesome stereo rig in the livingroom. Dan Hyman came bustling out to greet him, and Hughes nodded to the hi-fi set-up. "This looks like something new, eh?"

"Four months. That's only the radio playing—wait till I put on some records! I've got one demonstration record that'll knock you from here to Canarsie! But how about a drink, first? Scotch?"

"Good enough," Hughes said.

He would have preferred a martini, but Hyman was not a martini-type host; at Hughes' request he

would have mixed one, but it would have been a bad one, and Hughes knew it was safer to ask for Scotch. Hyman *understood* Scotch. He bought only the best.

Childless, the Hymans had no budget worries. A maid was preparing dinner. Hughes sat in the livingroom with both Hymans, surrounded by stereophonic sound, sipping Scotch on the rocks, listening to gossip about old mutual friends. Most of the gossip had a particularly unsavory flavor tonight, Hughes thought. He was getting the definite impression that all the talk was rigged to go in one direction.

"I suppose you've heard about Jean Stevenson?" Martha asked.

"Not since she moved to Hicksville. She have any more kids lately?"

"No, not lately. But she's Jean Mitchell now, for one thing."

"Really?" Hughes asked, surprised despite himself. The Stevensons had once been part of their set, four or five years back. He remembered Jean Stevenson as a small, pixyish brunette whose trim little body had borne four children without damage to its elfin beauty. "She got a divorce?"

"A particularly messy one," Dan Hyman said. "I know the lawyer slightly, and he said it was a nasty case. Jean fell in love with some fellow from a split-level up the block. He took to coming home early and spiriting her off, that sort of stuff. Until Ray found out about it. Then there was an explosion, and when it was all over Jean was married to her new boyfriend. An architect, I understand."

Hughes blinked. "Somehow I can't imagine Jean and Ray Stevenson married to anybody but each

other. They seemed to go together so naturally."

"These things happen," Martha said. "Dan, do you think Dave wants another drink?"

Hughes smiled weakly. "Yes, please. But tell me—what about the kids?"

"Ray got them. Jean's allowed to visit them one day a month, that's all."

"But you can't take a mother away from four young children!" Hughes protested.

"Evidently you can, if said mother is taken in adultery," Hyman said, handing Hughes a newly filled glass. "That was why the trial was so messy. But Ray was eventually able to prove that Jean had been screwing this architect up and down the landscape for months, and he got the kids. Jean'll just have to start a new family now."

Hughes shook his head. "How do you like that!"

Hyman's eyes gleamed. "Martha heard that the Woolstons are separated too. No divorce, yet—they're just seeing how they can get along without each other."

"You're kidding! Harry and Ella Woolston—why, that's incredible!"

But it was so. And the conversation continued in the same vein until dinner was ready: the focal point of the discussion seemed to be the marital peccadilloes of mutual friends. And, as a counterpoint, a constant flow of questions about Ellen, about the kids, about Hughes' plans for the future. The whole conversation seemed very, very carefully constructed. Hughes played right along, surprised at each revelation, tongue-clucking and confident that nothing like that could ever happen to *him*.

Martha asked several times about Hughes' "cousin," too. How she liked New York, when she planned to get married, Hughes negotiated all the hazards of the conversation with a glibness and an ease that surprised him. He wondered now how he had ever been inveigled into friendship with these people. It was clear that they had seen through his pretense and were toying with him, cat-fashion, to see how he would react. He thought he reacted well.

Dinner was excellent. Afterward, Martha excused herself to phone some friend of hers; she vanished upstairs, and Hyman took Hughes into the livingroom again to demonstrate the wonders of his hi-fi rig.

But that was not all on Hyman's mind. A few minutes after he put the record on, he began to look uncomfortable and anxious. And finally he said, in a low, worried voice, "Dave, do you mind if I talk about something personal with you?"

Here it comes, Hughes thought.

"Personal? What do you mean?" he asked.

Hyman began to fidget even more. He stared at the thick carpeting. "Look, Dave, I may be a hell of a way off base on this, and if I am I don't want you to get upset. What I want to say, I'm saying strictly because I want to save you from yourself, not because I want to meddle. I'm a little older than you, Dave, and I like you and Ellen a hell of a lot, even if we haven't seen as much of each other lately as we should have, and you've got two wonderful kids and I wouldn't want them to be hurt—"

Hughes cut the long monologue off brusquely. "What the hell are you getting at, Dan?"

Hyman looked up. His jaws firmed. "Don't think I'm a busybody, Dave. But this 'cousin' of yours —well, I kind of doubt she's your cousin."

My God, Hughes thought, trying desperately to keep his composure. *I was sure we had them fooled. Was it as obvious as all that?*

He laughed hollowly. "Christ, Dan, what kind of wild ideas are you harboring, anyway? I suppose you think the kid is my mistress, that I'm robbing the cradle while Ellen's back is turned—"

Hyman shook his head. "I'm not asking you to confirm it or deny it. I'm just saying my personal opinion. You and Ellen are two swell people. Regardless of any sudden passion you may feel—and this girl is certainly a beauty—I just want you to take the long view. Think of the kids, think of Ellen, Dave. There isn't one of us who doesn't step out of line now and then. Heck, I've done it myself a couple of times, though don't you go telling that to Martha. But this thing with you is different. I'm sure of it. We both spotted a—well, kind of a *glow* about you two. While you spouted all that crap about her being your cousin who went to Western Reserve and was pinned to a basketball player. That's what your tongues were saying, but your faces and eyes were saying that you two were in deep." Hyman paused. "Okay, now I've shot my mouth off. Tell me I'm all wrong, tell me she really *is* your cousin, tell me nothing's wrong between you and Ellen."

"Did you invite me over here tonight just to give me a little speech on the values of marital fidelity?"

"I invited you because I like you. Because Mar-

tha and I both like you."

"And because you want somebody else to gossip about," Hughes snapped. "Under the guise of giving paternal advice, you want to get all the gory details out of me, and then you can go whisper them all over the borough. But—" He stopped, seeing the hurt expression on Hyman's face.

"You've got the wrong idea, Davey-boy," Hyman said sadly. "You're *really* wrong."

"Hell, I'm sorry. That was a lousy thing for me to say. I've been under such a goddam strain—"

"Okay," Hyman said. "Have another drink. Let's sit back and listen to the music. Forget everything that we were just talking about. Except that in the hypothetical instance of infidelity we were just discussing abstractly, I want to go on record as saying that my private opinion is that the husband involved should attempt to extricate himself from the situation as soon as possible, before he does permanent harm to some innocent people. Now let's drop it."

Hughes smiled. "Okay. We'll drop it."

Music flowed up all around, and Hughes tried to relax. It was far from easy. A short time later, Martha returned from upstairs, and with her arrival the tension in the atmosphere seemed to vanish. The evening became more agreeable. They talked of old times, of business conditions, of the stock market, of the Hymans' forthcoming winter cruise to the British West Indies. Time sped; at ten o'clock, when Hughes decided it was time to leave, he realized he was actually unwilling to break away. There was no doubt in his mind, now: these people *knew*, and they were sympathetic. They didn't want him to go the

way Jean Stevenson and their other friends whose homes had been split. They wanted him to pull out of his adventure while there was still time.

They knew.

Mike knew.

Everyone would know, soon. It was impossible to hide the secret from anyone.

And they all said the same thing: *Don't be a fool, Dave. Don't wreck a wonderful home for a little extra tail. Give this girl the gate before you smash everything.*

It was sane, sound, sensible advice. It was the sort of advice he could think up for himself, no friends needed. But it was not so easy to follow. Intellectually, abstractly, he knew that the wise thing was to get uninvolved, and pronto. But how? In just a couple of weeks, Janice had embedded herself permanently in his self. How could he give up her smile, her little gasp of culmination, her breasts, her lustrous hair, her eager lips, her hunger to learn? She was part of him. He had never parted easily with anything he cherished.

He revolved the thoughts in his mind as he drove home from Kew Gardens.

Why am I so helpless?

Why can't I break this thing off?

He knew why. Janice was a compulsion, a disease, an addiction. A fever in his blood. No nonsense about this being a great romance. He hadn't suddenly discovered the girl of his dreams, somewhat belatedly, at thirty-four. Janice was a sweet kid with big knockers and hungry loins. She had a lech for him, he had a lech for her, and for the past few

weeks they had been satisfying their mutual cravings, disguising their open lust by inventing fancier words for it. Love, comradeship, intellectual union. Nothing but mutual hot pants. And impossible to turn off the heat.

He parked the car, rode upstairs, rang Janice's doorbell. It was almost eleven o'clock. She opened the door a crack, then wider.

"You're late. You said you'd be back by ten."

"You're a shrew."

"I'm an old witch. And you have liquor on your breath. Come on in and give me a kiss."

He hesitated, after crossing the threshold. She came up to him instead, flattening her body against his, grinding it back and forth. He felt the hard bone of her pelvis against his loins, and automatically his hands went to her breasts under the floppy shapeless blouse. She wore no bra, and the large, warm breasts flowed into his hands, filling them, overflowing. Her tongue dipped into his mouth, searching.

His hands dropped, and he gently forced her away from him. He sat down.

"They know about us," he said heavily.

"What do you mean, they know?"

"Just what I said. Dan called me aside and made it perfectly clear that we hadn't fooled them a bit with that talk about your being my cousin."

"Was he shocked?"

"No, just unhappy. He—he—Jan, he gave me some advice. The same advice my brother-in-law gave me yesterday, Jan."

"Which was?"

He brought his head up until his eyes met hers.

"To get out. To break this all up. To kiss you on the cheek and say goodbye. They don't think I ought to jeopardize the happiness of my kids and my wife by engaging in a sordid little affair."

"That's very sound advice," Janice said quietly. "It's never wise to break up a home with young children in it. How do you feel about our sordid little affair?"

"*I* didn't say it was sordid. They—implied it."

"Do you think it's sordid?"

"Of course not," he said.

"No, you love me. Isn't that so?" Her face was strangely serious, now. There was no little-girl kittenishness in it at all. Without makeup, in unglamorous clothes, she looked more mature, more solemn. "Tell me you love me, Dave. And mean it."

He lowered his head. "I love you, Jan. But can't you see that I still love Ellen too? And my kids."

"All right," she said. "If you get a divorce, five people are made unhappy. Your wife, your two children, my husband, and yourself. If you stick by Ellen, only two people are miserable: you and me. You suffer either way. But the arithmetic argues that you ought to choose the path that would cause the least general suffering. Let's call it off, Dave. Right here and now. Tonight."

"I—I can't tell if you're joking or not!"

Tears flooded her eyes suddenly. With an effort, she controlled herself, and laughed harshly. "Do you want to? Do you want to call it off?"

"Of course not! But—"

"But what?"

"But Ellen—the kids—"

"You can't have everything!"

"I'm in a cleft stick, and no room to wriggle." He clenched his fists impotently. "God, why did this ever happen to me?"

"Because you wanted it to," she said with incredible calm. "You were looking for a lover. You found one. Only it turned out to be more of a problem than it was worth, eh, Dave?"

Agony hooded his eyes. "I've got to make up my mind. One way or the other. And I've got to make it up right now, before anything goes any further."

"Yes. Make up your mind, Dave. Who gets hurt? You can't ride the fence forever."

He looked at her steadily, and his mind peeled away her clothing, and he saw her pink and warm and naked, her breasts quivering with excitement, her loins yearning for him. He remembered how it felt to have her beside him in bed, and how a lump came into his throat when she cooked for him or asked him to explain something about books or music, and he knew he loved her.

Ellen—Tony—Erika—

Losing the kids would be like losing his right and left arms. But he would still have them, in a way; the court would let him visit them; they were good kids, they would grow up well even without him, and, perhaps, they would forgive him. Ellen, too, maybe she would forgive him.

"Okay," he said hoarsely. "When I go up to the country this weekend, I'll tell Ellen that I've met someone else, that I'm in love, that I want a divorce. We'll work everything out calmly. You'll have to write to your husband and explain things.

It'll probably take six or eight months to get everything worked out, and then—"

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"I'm sure, Janice."

"Darling—"

"I love you," he whispered. She rose and came toward him, and he pulled her blouse off and cupped her bare breasts, and began to unzip her trousers. The swelling mound of her breasts was ripe and throbbing in his hand. Now that the decision was made, he felt calm, assured, confident.

A key turned in the door.

The door opened. Hughes turned, aghast.

"*Nick!*" Janice shrieked.

CHAPTER TWELVE

KELLER STOOD IN THE DOORWAY, a duffel-bag at his side, the key dangling from the chain in his hand. He was looking in at the pair in front of him. The expression on his face was a strange one—not really surprise, but more a look that reflected the confirmation of long-held expectation. He did not move.

Hughes stared at the other man with that weird clarity of perception that sometimes comes at moments of utter panic. He took in the close-cropped black hair, the heavy eyebrows, the dark eyes that now looked so cold. Keller's uniform was creased, as though he had been sleeping in it. He had not shaved in a day or two, and thick dark stubble sprouted on his jutting chin. He was Hughes' own height, about six feet two, but much brawnier. There was an electric moment of silence in the room. Keller stepped in, closing the door quietly behind him, seeming to control himself with a gigantic effort of will. He dropped the duffle-bag.

"Hello, Janice," he said. His voice was deep and harsh. "And your name is Hughes, isn't it? Hello, Mr. Hughes. Funny meeting you here."

Hughes' legs felt watery. He did not know what to say, did not know what to do, did not know where to go. He looked uncertainly at Janice, who had backed away from him the moment the door had opened. She was terribly pale, now, so pale that her nipples stood out like angry red scars against the

snowy hills of her bosom. Selfconsciously, she folded her arms across her breasts to hide them; then, as if realizing the futility of such a gesture, she snatched up her blouse, which Hughes had let fall to the floor, and pulled it over her head.

The silence held.

Keller took another step torward the guilty pair. He was only a kid, Hughes thought, but right now he seemed as terrifying as the Angel of Death. Keller was young, but there was something about being cuckolded that made a man older quickly.

Keller said quietly, "Where's your wife, Mr. Hughes? How come you didn't invite her to this party?"

"You don't understand," Hughes began thinly. "Janice and I—"

"Nick, what are you doing here?" Janice asked at the same moment.

A muscle was throbbing in the side of Keller's cheek. Ignoring what Hughes had begun to say, Keller turned to his wife and remarked, "This is what you call a furlough, dear. It happens that my father is very sick. He isn't expected to live. I got a wire from the hospital yesterday. I arranged a leave yesterday. I tried to telephone you as soon as I got things set. I called you at eight-thirty last night, Janice. That's eleven-thirty New York time, but I didn't get any answer. I kept calling until one in the morning. Four o'clock, your time. Then I decided you weren't going to be home any more that night. I decided I might as well not bother calling you. So I flew in from California this morning. I arrived at the airport earlier this evening."

"You could have called," she murmured.

"I didn't want to, now," he said. "I wanted to come in and surprise you. But I guess we surprised each other, eh, Janice?" He glanced venomously at Hughes. "I don't know much about you, Mr. Hughes. Are you an artist, perhaps? Was my wife posing for you? She's got a wonderful figure, hasn't she?"

Hughes said faintly, "We've got something we want to tell you—"

"Go ahead," Keller said.

"We're getting married!" Janice blurted, when Hughes hesitated. "Dave is leaving his wife, and you're going to give me a divorce, and—"

"What?" Keller asked. He looked quickly at both of them. "How long have you two been cooking this thing up? Tell me!"

"It—it happened this summer," Janice said. "Nick, don't make a fuss. You didn't want me to live at the base with you, and this is what happened! You didn't have to leave me here all by myself. You could have taken me with you. You could have—"

"Shut up," Keller snapped. He looked at Hughes. "What do your wife and kids have to say about this new deal, Hughes?"

"We haven't told them yet," he said. He was still trembling, but it was impossible to tell from Keller's stony expression whether or not there were going to be real complications. Hughes found himself wishing desperately that he had never gotten involved in this. It was ridiculous for him to be standing here between these two people— these two *children*—in the role of a marauder, of an interloping adulterer. He felt himself withering under Keller's

icy glare.

"You haven't told them yet," Keller repeated. "And when were you going to tell them? When were you going to tell *me?*"

Janice said in a more steady voice, "Dave was going to let his wife know this weekend, when he went up to the country to visit her. And then we would write to you and explain—"

"Up to the country!" Keller said. He smiled oddly. "So *that's* it. Now I catch the picture! Your wife's away for the summer, eh, Hughes? You're all alone, and getting a little horny, and there's this dame with the big bosom living all by herself next door to you, and you figured you'd cut yourself a slice to make the summer a little more interesting. Sure, that makes sense. But how'd this marriage business get into the act?"

"We love each other," Janice said indignantly.

"That true?" Keller jeered. "You love her, Hughes?"

Hughes moved his lips uncertainly for a moment before words came. "I—I—yes. Dammit, yes. I love her. I'm sorry that she had to be another man's wife, and I'm sorry that it looks like we were skulking around behind your back. We didn't expect you to come busting in. We were going to let you know."

Keller's lips curled derisively. "You *love* her," he said softly, savoring it. "How old are you, anyway? Forty? Thirty-seven?"

"Thirty-four," Hughes said.

"Twelve years older. All you wanted was a nice young juicy piece of tail. And my wife happened to be the handiest. How'd she ever sell you on the

marrying bit, though? That doesn't fit in."

"I told you," Hughes said wearily. "I love her. I'm planning to divorce my wife and marry her. And if *you* had loved her, you'd have taken her with you to California instead of leaving her here to go out of her mind with loneliness—"

Keller scowled. "You know why I didn't take her to California with me? Go on, laugh at this, because it's funny. It's a scream. I didn't take her because I was so goddam jealous. That's right, jealous! I was afraid to bring her out there and have her live on the base, because I know what happens to army wives. They go out of their minds with boredom, that's what, and there are always plenty of willing bachelors around the place. Temptation comes easily in a setup like that. I have to be away from the base two, three, four days, a week, sometimes. So I decided it was safer to leave her here, in our old apartment, in this nice stuffy smug middle-class Queens house, figuring that everybody was so stuffy here that she'd be safe, that I wouldn't have to worry, that at least there wouldn't be a bunch of tail-happy enlisted men ogling her and whistling at her and following her and maybe raping her or seducing her. And then you come along! Mr. Dave Hughes with your nice little wife and your nice little kids, and I walk into my own home at eleven o'clock at night and there you are and my wife half naked and your hand all over her tits—"

He stopped. Muscles were quivering in both of his cheeks now. He looked about to explode.

Hughes regarded him anxiously. *He could kill me,* Hughes thought. *He could murder me and there*

wouldn't be a jury in the world that would convict him for it. But maybe he'll be reasonable. Maybe there'll be some way of getting this hellish mess untangled.

There was no turning back now. There was no way of smiling politely and saying, So sorry, I really didn't mean to sleep with your wife, Mr. Keller, and now that you mention it I have to admit it was rather an impolite thing to do. So let's be civilized about it and I'll bow out gracefully and stay married to my own wife, and you can have your Janice back, only slightly used.

No, he couldn't say that.

He was out on a limb. There was no direction to go but further out.

He said, "I don't really know how to put this. Nick—Mr. Keller. Naturally it looks lousy as all hell, you walking in and finding us here. Well, I can't really explain—it's crazy, that's all—but I simply can't live without Janice now. If you were able to let her stay behind for so many months, it means you *can* live without her, whatever your reason. So I'm asking you, as one man to another, to step aside peacefully. Janice loves me. I want to marry her. If you—"

"You bastard," Keller said suddenly. "Standing here in my own apartment and trying to tell me why I should let you go on laying my wife!"

"I love him!" Janice burst out. "I want to spend the rest of my life with him!"

"You're still my wife!" Keller shouted.

"Not for long," Janice snapped. "Whatever we had is finished, Nick. Don't make things any harder

than they have to be. I don't have a shred of love for you any more, not a shred. I'm all Dave's. And—"

"You lying whore!" Keller cried. "You round-heels slut! Shut your mouth, you—"

And then it happened, what Hughes had been dreading for the past fifteen minutes. Keller reached his boiling point, and all control snapped. Ht reached out and grabbed Janice, drawing her to him so roughly that the buttons of her blouse popped. The blousefront hung open, exposing her naked breasts. Keller's big, hairy hand went back and forth, *flick-flack*, slapping her tender breasts, and she screamed and recoiled as the savage blows ripped across her delicate nipples, and then he hit her in the face. cursing her bitterly, and threw her across the room. She landed against the couch. She sat there, dazed, her blouse open, holding her hands to her pain-smitten breasts. A driblet of blood smeared her chin; her lip was split and continuing to bleed.

Hughes felt himself moving forward. He had no choice, no choice at all, now. Keller had declared war, and the only thing Hughes could do as a human being and as a man was to hop into the breach.

It had been more years than Hughes could remember since he had gone toward another person with the intention of doing violence. He was out of shape and slow, and Keller was a trained soldier at the height of his physical strength. Yet Hughes knew he *had* to attack. The younger man's brutality called for violence in kind, not for sweet reasonability and honeyed words.

He lashed out at Keller with what he hoped would be a telling blow. But Keller spun, and

Hughes' fist grazed the other man's shoulder. A bolt of pain shot up through Hughes' knuckles to his elbow.

"Don't!" Janice screamed. "Don't fight him, Dave! He'll murder you!"

Hughes shook his head grimly and tried to aim a second punch. He kept thinking that Keller was like a rock, that no matter where the punch landed it would do more damage to his own fist than to his opponent's body. But the punch never landed. Keller's fist came cascading into the pit of Hughes' stomach, and the older man staggered back, gasping for breath, nearly tripping over the low table. Keller came after him.

"Leave him alone!" Janice shrieked. "Nick, don't do anything to him!"

Hughes made feeble defensive motions. Then he saw Keller's fist coming at him like Thor's hammer, and he tried to duck, but it was impossible. The fist travelled on a short arc and collided with Hughes' left cheekbone. The impact grated Hughes' jaws together, and he felt the fierce pain of a bitten tongue, and his brain seemed to rock within his skull. He waved his fist at Keller, who knocked the weak blow aside and swung again, hitting him in the mouth this time. He tasted blood, and started to sag, feeling foci of pain simultaneously in his mouth and under his eye and in his stomach.

Above him, Keller laughed triumphantly and turned away, back to Janice. Dimly, through a haze, Hughes heard Janice crying out. He forced his eyes to focus and saw an expanse of pinkness, and realized that Keller had somehow stripped off

the rest of Janice's clothes, and had taken his belt out of his pants and was whipping her. Hughes' legs would not give him purchase as he struggled to rise. He saw Janice spinning and leaping, trying to escape the insane blows of the whip. The belt landed on the soft mounds of her buttocks, leaving an angry welt on the quivering flesh; it slammed across the pale while hills of her breasts, imprinting a red line. The belt licked across her belly, her thighs.

"You'll kill her," Hughes muttered, through pain-swollen lips. He rose totteringly to his feet. Janice lay curled in a huddled ball, and Keller stood above her, not whipping her any more, simply looking down. Hughes hefted a lamp. If he could only throw it with some accuracy, put the madman out of commission before his rage became really murderous—

"Drop it!" Keller yelled. The belt whicked toward him, cracking numbingly against his wrist, and the lamp fell of its own accord. Keller came toward him again. He seemed to be twenty feet tall. Hughes stood uncertainly, his mind shrouded by pain, and he saw the blur of motion and then Keller hit him in the left side, below the ribs, and almost at the same instant hit him in the mouth again. He dropped to his knees, looking down dumbly at the floor and at the oddly bright drops of blood dripping from his face. He heard a buzzing in his ears.

A big hand scooped him up. Keller, dragging him to his feet, hitting him again—across the chin, and Hughes heard the sharp snap of his neck mus-

cles, and he sagged yet again and dropped floorward. The pain stopped mattering now, although he was aware of a fist or perhaps a boot connecting with his body, and far away he heard the tinny sound of a woman's screams, and he clawed wildly at the air, trying to pick himself up off the floor, but no part of his body would obey.

"Don't—hit—me—" he murmured, or tried to. A dizzying wall of greenish-black color was whirling round his head. He closed his eyes tight, and let himself slip down into the depths of the whirlpool.

He had no idea how long he was unconscious. He was aware, suddenly, of a cold voice saying, "All right, Hughes, wake up, now. Give me that glass of water, Janice."

Water cold as fire splattered in his face. He opened a puffy eye.

Keller stood above him, smiling unpleasantly, holding an empty waterglass in his hand. Behind him was Janice, her nakedness now cloaked by a robe. She was pale, her eyes tear-reddened, her face bleak and terrified.

"Can you stand up?" Keller asked.

"I—think so." Hughes tried, and made it on the third try. His face felt swollen. He seemed to have three lower lips. There was still a buzzing in his ears. He had no fight left in him at all, now. Not a bit. "How—how long was I out?" he asked.

"Fifteen minutes, maybe."

"You—you were whipping her—I had to stop you—"

"You're mixed up, dad. I didn't start whipping

her until after I knocked you down the first time. Suppose you get out of here, now."

"Janice—you'll hurt Janice—"

"Janice and I had a little talk while you were asleep, dad. She and I decided that she was going to stay married to me, at least for the time being. Furthermore, she's going to come back to California with me for the rest of my tour of duty. She isn't marrying you."

Hughes looked at her. She nodded, tight-lipped, frightened. "I'm going with him, Dave."

"But—"

"I *have* to," she said softly.

He remembered all that Janice had told him about her husband—how fiercely possessive he was, how unable he would be to take the thought of losing her. Hughes did not want to know what sort of threats Keller had used on her. All he knew was that it was over, now, and he was lucky to be alive.

"Get out of here," Keller said. "And keep out of my way while I'm here. The next time you get ideas about my wife, I'll kill you."

Hughes looked down at his feet. "There—won't be any next time."

"Okay. Just so you know."

Keller held the door open. Hughes shambled out into the hall, not looking back at Janice. He heard the door slam behind him. He stood in front of his door for a moment before he could collect his wits enough to take his key out of his pocket.

He went in.

He sank down on the livingroom couch and

began to sob. Dry sobs, that racked through his entire body and filled it with pain. Everything was done with, now. The ogre of a husband had come home, he had trounced his cuckolder, he had whipped his wife back into line. Hughes shuddered. He felt completely demolished. Crushed. He had babbled to Keller about his love for Keller's wife, and he had had his brains beaten in as a lesson. With odd clarity, he saw himself now as a pitiful and pathetic character, who had stepped out of line and who had been rudely put in his place. The beating had been deserved. If *he h*ad been a soldier, and he had come home suddenly to find an older man pawing up Ellen, he might easily have done murder. All things considered, he thought, he had come off quite lightly at Keller's hands. He might not even be scarred—on the outside. But the inner scar would remain, the scar of utter, complete, humiliating defeat.

At any rate, it was ended. Whatever Janice's destiny held in store for her, she could never go back to him, not after witnessing his complete demolition at her husband's hands. He could no longer feel like a man, with Janice. Not after that.

He rose, sighing from the pain, and hobbled over to the mirror. A swollen, purplish, unrecognizable face looked blankly back at him.

Christ, he thought. *He really made a mess of me.*

The pain closed in again. Hughes' head began to pound. He made his way back to the couch, swayed, and tumbled down onto it, too dizzy to stand.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOR A LONG WHILE HE SAT THERE, feeling the steady waves of pain beating over him. Every time he drew a breath, it was hell. Even with his eyes closed, mottled spheres of light danced in front of his face. When he swallowed saliva, his jaws protested. He was nauseated by the blood he had already swallowed. His swollen tongue felt like an enormous sponge someone had crammed into his mouth.

Pain everywhere.

Physical pain—and the deeper pain of humiliation, and disgrace.

Hughes knew he had to get a doctor. Not have a doctor come to him, but go to a doctor. There would be X-Rays to take; maybe he had broken ribs, a concussion, fractured jaw—anything. He had to go to a doctor. And not Dr. Aaronson, the family doctor, either. This would have to be a doctor who did not know him at all.

And he would have to get out of the house before dawn. He could not risk having the neighbors see him like this. He could not risk meeting Janice in the morning—or her husband.

He looked at his watch. Miraculously, it had come through the fracas unbroken. It told him that the time was three-twenty A.M. He had until dawn to get out of the building.

Lurching to his feet, he staggered over to the telephone and plopped down weakly in the chair

near it. With shaky fingers he began to dial Mike Niles' number. Niles was his only hope, the only man likely to help him at this hour.

The phone began to ring at the other end. Once . . . twice . . . a third time. A fourth. Hughes started to panic. Suppose Niles had picked this night to carouse with one of his mistresses? Suppose he was in bed with somebody right now, and did not care to answer the phone? Six rings. A seventh.

"Hello?" Niles said, sounding sleepy and irritated.

"Mike . . . me, Dave . . ."

"What's that? Speak up. I can't hear you!"

"Dave . . . help me, Mike," Hughes mumbled, unable to raise his voice.

"Dave? My God, man, what's the matter? Where are you? What happened?"

"I'm . . . home," Hughes said feebly. "I was in a fight. Come over, Mike. Fast."

"Jesus Christ, you aren't cut or shot or anything?"

"Just beaten up. Come over here fast. You've got to take me to a doctor."

"I'm on my way," Niles said. "Just hold everything. I'm on my way."

Hughes tried to smile gratefully, but the effort cost him a few moments of agony. He replaced the receiver, lurched over to the front door, unlocked it, left it ajar, and went back to the couch to wait for his brother-in-law's arrival.

It was nearly half an hour before Niles arrived. He pushed the door open, came in, switched

on the light. Hughes lifted his face.

"*Christ,*" Niles whispered incredulously. "What the hell did you fall off?"

"Does it look bad?"

"It looks like you had an argument with a concrete mixer. What did it?"

Hughes pointed toward the door. "Her husband came home. He caught us. Hurts to talk. Lips all banged up. He whipped her with belt—beat me up. Big bruiser of a kid. Got to see a doctor. Not—my—doctor."

Niles was kneeling, staring at Hughes' battered face. "Anything broken?"

"I don't know. Don't think so."

"You're going to have a shiner, and your lip is split, and—Jesus, man, he really gave it to you!"

"You don't need to tell me that. Get me out of here, Mike. Before the neighbors see me. Take me to your place now."

"Can you walk?"

"Give me a hand."

Niles helped him up. "Got your keys?"

"On the table there."

"Okay. Let's go."

With Niles' assistance, he hobbled out into the hallway. He waited, listening, while Niles locked the apartment door. No sounds came from the Keller apartment. Coldly Hughes wondered if Keller had killed her. Probably not; the one to kill was the seducer, not the victim. And Keller had spared him.

Niles tucked the key into Hughes' right-hand pocket and helped him toward the elevator. They

rode downstairs silently. It was just before four in the morning, and darkness still prevailed. The night was cool, and fog shrouded the sky, blotting out the stars.

"Skip the safety belt," Hughes murmured, as Niles put him in the car. "I hurt down there too."

"Okay." The car started. "Did he hit you with anything but his fists?"

"No."

"What about the girl?"

"His belt, I told you. He was like a wild man."

"You're lucky he didn't kill you. I thought he was supposed to be in California."

"Came home, surprise," Hughes wheezed painfully. "His father sick, or something. Walked right in."

"While you were doing it?"

"We were just hugging," Hughes said. "But she had her blouse and bra off. We told him . . . told him we were getting married . . . he blew his stack."

Niles jerked his head around in astonishment. "Getting *married?* After what I told you to do? Dave, you must be out of your head. What about Ellen and the kids? What about—"

"Doesn't matter now," Hughes said somberly. "He's taking her back to California with him. It's all off."

"Thanks be for that!"

"It isn't—the way I wanted it—"

"I suppose you wanted to get beaten up, too," Niles said acidly. "Oh, well. If you haven't learned a lesson this time, you never will."

Hughes said nothing. Talking was painful. He closed his eyes and tried to relax as the big car purred along.

Some time later, he was aware that the ride had ended, that Niles was carrying him out of the car and into the house. He allowed himself to be deposited in a heap on the couch. Niles stood above him, surveying him.

"Let me get that shirt off you," Niles said. "All bloody. I'll give you one of mine when we go to the doctor."

Ever so gently, Niles unbuttoned Hughes' shirt and slipped it off. The motion brought fresh pain. Niles vanished for a moment, returning with a wad of cotton and a small bowl.

"Hold still," Niles ordered. "I'll get some of the dried blood off you, so you don't look like such a fright."

Each touch of the wet cotton was like the brand of a white-hot iron. Niles swabbed carefully, stepping back after a few moments to admire his handiwork.

"There," he said. "That's a lot better. But you're going to be a mess for a couple of weeks, at least. You'll have a lot of explaining to do on Friday, that's for damned sure. But don't worry. We'll dream up something you can tell Ellen. How about a drink, now, to knock out some of the pain?"

Hughes shook his head. "I couldn't hold it."

"Pill, then? I've got the damndest assortment of sleepy-sleepy pills. Let me fix you something. You'll feel a lot better if you can get some sleep."

Hughes did not protest, except to say, "Make

it a small one. I'm likely to choke on anything big."

"One small pill coming up."

Niles scurried away, returning with a pill and a glass of water. Hughes swallowed it quickly. He expected an immediate cessation of pain, and, of course, was disappointed—but within a few moments he began to grow hazy, to feel a soft cottony blankness settling over this pain-wracked mind. "I'm going under," he said.

"Fine. Come inside and lie down."

Hughes let himself be helped into the bedroom. Niles loosened his trousers and took off his shoes. Hughes was at the edge of darkness now.

He managed to mutter, "In the morning—call my office for me. Tell them—tell them I had an accident, I won't be in tomorrow and maybe not for the rest of the week— the number is—"

"I know the number, stupid. Get yourself some sleep, and let me take care of details."

Hughes tried to smile. It was so good, he thought, to have someone to rely on. Someone strong, someone solid, like Mike . . . sleep took him.

When he woke, there was a roaring in his ears, his eyelids felt pasted together," his tongue seemed to be swollen to ten times its usual bulk. He was stiff in every muscle. He did not try to sit up. His left eye would not open. Vaguely, through the right one, he perceived Niles standing near the bed.

"How do you feel?" Niles asked.

"Lousy. What's the matter with my eye?"

"In a word, it's a mess. Remember that photo of Carmen Basilio after he fought Ray Robinson? Well, you look worse."

"What time is it?"

"Half past eleven. A.M., in case you're doubtful about that. I phoned your office at nine, and you've got an appointment with my doctor at half past twelve. Think you can stand some breakfast?"

"I doubt it."

"Okay, then. Just lie still and let yourself heal. I've got a little work to do before we visit the medic."

Niles disappeared. Hughes lay back, feeling the sharp pain in his side at every breath, feeling the million pains through his body. From another room came the steady click of Niles' electric typewriter.

The love affair had certainly come to a thumping close, Hughes thought ruefully. They had had their few weeks of playing the beast with two backs, and then the curtain had descended. A core of sadness clasped his heart. Perhaps he would never see Janice again. The weeks of love and of Mozart, of martinis, Chablis, Kafka, breasts—they would become fast-fading memories. Yet for a couple of weeks he had *lived*.

He tried to smile. But smiling was painful.

Around noon, the typewriter stopped its unbroken chatter, and Niles returned.

"I've got the script under control," he said. "Let's get over to the doctor's."

"Give me a hand."

Hughes let himself be helped up. Niles gave him a fresh shirt, put it on him, buttoned it, tied his shoelaces for him. Hughes felt absudly helpless. This was what it was like to be ninety years old, he thought, as he made his way on Niles' arm out to the car in front.

The doctor's office was a twenty-minute drive eastward, into Nassau County. There was no one in the waiting-room. Hughes realized that Niles used very expensive doctors indeed. This one's name was Heinsohn, George Heinsohn, and he and Niles were on first-name terms.

"This is my brother-in-law, George. Dave Hughes."

"He really *was* in a fight, eh?"

"A drunken brawl," Niles said. "That is, the *other* fellow was drunk. Poor Dave was just trying to be a good Samaritan, and you see where it got him. But we want to keep it out of the papers, because his employers are very stuffy, and they'd never believe that Dave really was only trying to break up a fight between two other people—"

"Of course," Heinsohn said. He was a sleek, prosperous-looking man of about forty. "Suppose we lie down over here, Mr. Hughes? I'd like to get some X-rays, and then we'll have a look at that eye of your—"

For half an hour Hughes lay quiescently, allowing himself to be X-rayed, prodded, examined, nodded over. Niles remained in the far corner of the office, saying nothing. Heinsohn bustled around, humming slightly, occasionally murmuring something unintelligible.

An assistant came and went, taking the undeveloped X-Ray plates and returning them some time later. She was a girl of about twenty-six, and she eyed Hughes' battered nakedness with serene disinterest.

At length Heinsohn said, having studied the X-Ray plates and examined Hughes' puffed eye and

swollen mouth, "You're a very lucky man, Mr. Hughes. It looks a lot worse than it really is. Not that you're completely undamaged, of course. There's a cracked rib on the left side, and we'll have to tape you. And you'll need a couple of stitches in the corner of your mouth, over here. But that eye of yours is all right, even though it looks like the wrath of God just now, and the plates don't show any skull fractures, bone breaks, or stuff like that. No broken nose. No internal injuries. Just miscellaneous bruises, a couple of minor cuts, some swellings and abrasions. You probably won't even have any visible souvenirs of the fracas, once all the external damage has healed."

"That's a relief."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Heinsohn said cheerily. "Well, shall we get on with the repairs?"

They got on with them. Heinsohn called for his assistant, and together they wound strips of wide tape around Hughes' side, over the cracked rib. Then the girl administered a local anesthetic and Heinsohn took two stitches in the corner of Hughes' mouth, where the swinging knuckles had ripped open flesh. The girl tidied him up some, dabbing away whatever caked blood Niles had been unable to remove before.

When it was done, Heinsohn said, "Stay off solid food for a couple of days. Plenty of liquids, soup, maybe some toast. Your stomach's going to be pretty queasy for a while, and if you load yourself up and vomit, you won't be doing those stitches or that rib any good. Clear?"

Hughes nodded. "What about the eye?"

"I'll give you an eye-patch, if you want. It'll make you look a little like Captain Kidd, but at

least people won't run screaming away from you when they see that horrendous shiner. You'll just have to be patient and wait for the bruises to go away." He scribbled a prescription. "Get yourself a bottle of these. They'll make life livable until the aches and pains go away."

Hughes dressed and mumbled something about the bill, but both Heinsohn and Niles immediately cut him off. The bill would go to Niles, they told him, and Niles would not hear of Hughes' paying it. "After all, I took you to my doctor, and he's an expensive man. Why should you be stuck for the outlay?"

Hughes was too tired to put up an argument; besides, he suspected that Heinsohn's bill would be of astronomical magnitude, and it was just as well to let Niles absorb it. He went outside with Niles, and got into the car.

"Good man, isn't he?" Niles asked.

"Very good," Hughes agreed.

"You notice that assistant? Or aren't you in any shape for noticing pretty women?"

Hughes shrugged painfully. "I saw her. What about her. What about her?"

"She's Heinsohn's wife. Situation a little like yours. Man married ten years, has a couple of kids, suddenly meets a much younger girl. He's forty-two, she's twenty-five. Only she wasn't married, which made things simpler. He married her last year. Almost looks like his daughter."

Hughes said nothing. *Janice,* he thought. *Janice!*

Niles drove him back to his apartment, and stayed there with him for a while. Together, they concocted a story to tell Ellen. Hughes had been lonely

Tuesday night, and after coming home from the Hymans he had gone out, for a midnight stroll. While walking, he had come upon two teenagers beating up a third boy. He had tried to interfere, whereupon the two attackers had turned on him and knocked him down, before fleeing.

It was believable enough, both that Hughes should have gone for a stroll and that he should have encountered teenage violence. What wasn't terribly believable was that he would have interfered, but Ellen could always assume that he had been momentarily and ill-advisedly inspired with a burst of Boy Scout heroism. As for the rest of the story, they decided that he had made his way to a nearby outdoor phonebooth and had called Niles, who had fetched him, taken him home, and taken him to his own doctor the next day. Neat, convincing, satisfying. Ellen need never know that Hughes had actually been battered by the husband of the woman he had seduced.

After Niles had gone, pleading an urgent deadline, Hughes removed the eye-patch and stared at his face in the mirror. He needed a shave, and his face looked puffy, bloated, almost brutish. The closed eye looked grotesquely ugly. His tongue was still sore and swollen. It was going to be a couple of days before he stopped looking and feeling like a wreck.

He was fiercely curious about Janice, but he did not dare go across the hall, did not even dare open his door. He sat quietly, doing nothing, reading nothing, trying to think nothing. Around five-thirty, he rose and made himself some soup, and

sipped it delicately, making sure each spoonful had settled in his stomach before he ventured to down the next one.

At six o'clock the telephone rang.

It was probably Niles, he thought, calling up to check on his healing progress. He was stunned, then, to pick up the phone, mutter a "Hello," and hear Janice's voice say, "I can only talk for a second, Dave."

"Where are you?"

"At the airport," she said. "Nick just went into the washroom, so I could call you. How do you feel after—after what he did to you?"

"I'll live. I don't look pretty right now, that's all. What's this airport business?"

"Oh," she said in a flat voice. "Nick's father died last night. They had the funeral today, and we packed, and we moved out. I'm leaving for California in half an hour, Dave. And—and I just wanted to say—goodbye, Dave."

"Goodbye? But—"

"It has to be!" she whispered. "Oh, Dave, we made a mess of things, but at least the matter's been taken out of our hands now. Nick won't hear of a divorce. He apologized for beating me last night—I'm so sore I can't sit down— but he wants me so desperately much. And he won't give me a choice. So I'll have to go with him. And it's better this way, for you, for Ellen—"

"But do you still love me?" Hughes asked feverishly.

"Love you?" she repeated. "I—I don't know, Dave. But it doesn't matter now. We'll never see

each other again. We mustn't think of each other, even." She gasped. "Oh-oh. Nick's coming. Goodbye, Dave. Goodbye—darling—"

"Goodbye, Janice," he said to the dead phone. *Darling.*

He let the receiver drop back into its cradle. He tried to laugh. So that was the way it ended, he thought. An overnight departure, a hurried phone-call, one last word of endearment to last him for the rest of his life. And the chapter called *Janice* was ended, now. Like a destroying hurricane, Nick Keller had swooped past and had ripped her forever out of his life, leaving numbness behind.

It's better this way, she had said. Maybe it was, he thought. Maybe. He conjured up the image of her body as it looked naked, ready for love, and his heart writhed with longing and despair. It was no good, mourning for her now, he thought. She had never legitimately been his, and now she was gone from him forever.

Help me to forget her, he prayed.

Help me to forget.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BY THURSDAY MORNING, THE SWELLING had gone down a good deal. The eye was still purplish, but he could open the lids now, and his lips and tongue were nearly back to normal. He was able to shave, and that helped restore some aspect of his ordinary appearance. He still was no beauty, though, and he ached in every limb from Keller's punches. He phoned the office that morning and told the girl that he would not be in for a second consecutive day, and that in all probability he would be out on Friday as well.

Half an hour later, there was a call from Mike Niles, who wanted to know how the invalid was coming along. Hughes told him that he was on the way to recovery, and added that Janice had phoned him from the airport the night before. "I guess she's in California by this time," he said.

"You don't know how lucky you are," Niles told him. "You got out of that nasty business at the cost of a beating, nothing more. No divorce, no scandals. You didn't even get killed by the offended husband, which might have very easily happened. Listen, Dave, next time you get an itch to roam, pick up some chippie, lay her, forget her. Don't get this deep again."

"I'm not out of it yet, Mike."

"What do you mean? The girl's in California, isn't she? It's all over."

"Yes, *that* part of it's over. But now I have to go back to Ellen."

"So? You've got an airtight story to cover the bruises."

"I don't mean that. I've got to live with myself, now, if I go back to her—after having loved someone else."

"You still worried about being in love?"

"I loved that girl," Hughes said quietly. "I don't doubt that for a minute. And now I have to go see my wife as if nothing has happened, as though there isn't any change in our relationship. It's hard to explain, Mike."

"It sure is. And I probably wouldn't understand it anyway. I'm not the type for emotional subtleties. You screwed some girl, it's over, now everything returns to normal. What do you have to make a production out of it for, Dave?"

"Never mind," Hughes said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Right. You going to work?"

"No. Stop by and pick me up whenever you want to drive up there."

A moment after Hughes hung up, the phone rang again. This time it was his immediate superior, Mr. Gardner, who—in the form of a get-well call—wanted to urge Hughes to get the hell back to work.

"Just what is it that happened to you?" Gardner asked.

"A couple of teenage kids jumped me," Hughes said. "I don't think it got into the papers. I was walking, and I tried to break up a fight, and they banged me around. I got a cracked rib and a shiner, and I'm pretty ugly right now."

"You'll need to rest a few days, I suppose?"

"I ought to be okay by Monday," Hughes said. "Maybe not perfectly presentable, but I'll come in."

"I hope so, Dave. Work's piling up, you know. This is the first time you've missed a payday since you came to us, and we miss you sorely."

"I'm sorry," Hughes said. "I'll be in on Monday."

He smiled sourly as he hung up. The explanation of his injuries rolled glibly enough off his tongue, he thought. It was getting to the point where he almost believed it himself. He could see the kids, in their black leather jackets, with their mean, ratty faces, their cold, dully unintelligent eyes full of hatred, advancing toward him, their fists lashing out, and then their laughter as he went toppling into the gutter—

Only it hadn't been that way. It had been an outraged husband, thrashing him in the time-honored way.

Hughes thought about the weekend, the coming trip to the mountains to see Ellen. It was too easy, letting the matter drop like this. Keller had come along and ended the affair, and now he could tell his little lie and slip back into his old life, with the memories of Janice's ruby-tipped breasts and white thighs to keep warm for the rest of his days. But that was wrong, he thought. It was cowardly, to slide along with the situation as it had been directed for him. True, Keller's violence had put an end to what seemed like an insoluble conflict. He no longer had to worry about choosing between Janice and Ellen.

Now he had a different choice.

He could choose between complacent return to

the *status quo ante,* and possible destruction of his marriage.

He began to perspire.

It could all be so simple, he thought. *If I were somebody like Mike Niles, I could just shrug everything off and go back to the way things were before I stepped out. But I'm not Mike Niles. I'm me. Do-it-the-hard-way Hughes. And so I have to make things complicated for myself all the time.*

He looked at his watch. It was almost eleven o'clock. Up in the country, Ellen and the kids were probably splashing around in a pre-lunch swim. A lump formed in Hughes' throat as he thought of how close he had come to losing the kids, to losing Ellen as well.

He wanted to be with them.

He wanted to be with them right now.

He had to talk to Ellen.

Hands trembling, Hughes reached for the phone and dialed Mike Niles' number. Niles picked up on the fourth sing, sounding annoyed at being disturbed in the middle of his work.

"Yes?"

"Mike, this is Dave."

"Something the matter?"

"I just wanted to tell you—I won't be going up to the mountains with you tomorrow. I've decided to go right now, today."

"How come?"

"I'm just going crazy, pacing around here. As long as I'm not going to work, I might as well go up there and get some fresh air and sunshine a day early."

"Maybe it isn't so smart, Dave. Another day and

you won't look so banged up. You'll give everybody a nasty shock if you walk in there looking the way you probably look this morning—"

"I'm going, Mike. Right now."

Niles was silent a moment. "Okay, Dave," he said finally. "Do whatever you want. Tell Beth I'll be there at around six o'clock tomorrow, will you?"

"Will do," Hughes said, and hung up.

He went into the bedroom, took his little suitcase from the closet, and packed quickly. He discarded the garish eyepatch and donned a pair of sunglasses instead; they hid his eye pretty well, except for the area of discoloration near his cheekbone. They weren't as comfortable over the bruised area as the patch was, but he decided he looked too ghastly in the patch—Ellen's first thought would certainly be that he had lost the eye.

He prepared a couple of cream-cheese-and-jelly sandwiches and put them into a paper bag, for lunch later on. That was about the strongest food he could digest, just now. He locked up the apartment, pausing in the hallway for just a moment and looking at Janice's door. The nameplate, *Ncholas Keller,* had been removed from the little bracket under the doorbell. There was a coppery taste of despair in his throat. They were really gone, then. It hadn't been a dream of some sort.

Gingerly, he got behind the wheel of his car. The mere effort of depressing the clutch made his injured side ache, but he grimly vowed not to give up the idea of making the trip today. He had to talk to Ellen. And he did not want Mike Niles within a hundred miles of him while he talked.

It was a beautiful day, and at that hour the roads were all but empty. Hughes cruised serenely along, growing relaxed behind the wheel as tension and pain ebbed away. The sky was fantastically blue, with little puffs of fleece near the horizon. The sun, golden-bright, filtered through the frame of the car and warmed his aching body. He stopped after an hour and a half, pulling the car off onto the shoulder to eat one of his sandwiches. Then he started up again. By two o'clock, he was at the road that led down to the lake, and to the bungalow colony.

The colony was quiet, only the sounds of splashing coming from the lake breaking the afternoon silence. Hughes checked himself in the car's mirror. With the sunglasses on, he didn't look too dreadful. His lips were a bit puffy, but not to any astonishingly disfiguring degree. Shock on first sight was what he wanted to avoid.

He stepped out of the car. Almost instantly, Larry Niles came running up out of nowhere, a tanned, skinny sprite wearing saggy, skimpy trunks.

"Uncle Dave's here! Uncle Dave's here!" he shrilled.

A moment later, Beth came around from the front of the house. She stopped, her mouth forming a little O of surprise. She was wearing a bikini that barely covered the critical areas, and she seemed flabbergasted at the sight of him.

"Dave! What on Earth—of all people—"

"Whoa, sis! Calm down!"

"Ellen was trying to reach you all day, practically. And you look like you've been in a fight, and you're here a day early, and where's Mike, and

Ellen's in town at the doctor with Tony, and—"

Hughes took his sister by the arm. "Hold it! Slow, girl! One thing at a time. Why is Ellen at the doctor with Tony?"

Beth tried to calm herself. "He—he got bitten by a snake."

"What?"

"It was only a silly little garter snake," Beth said. "I saw the whole thing. Tony was trying to catch it, and it turned around and nipped his finger. But Ellen almost had a fit. She was convinced it was a rattler, and she insisted on taking Tony into town for injections, and she tried to phone you in the city to tell you about it. Only your office said you were home, sick. That nearly sent Ellen frantic, and she tried to call you at home, but there wasn't any answer, and she couldn't wait around any longer so she took Tony to town. I called Mike's about an hour ago, but he's never home on Thursday afternoons anyway. And then all of a sudden you show up. Why does your face look like that?"

"I got roughed up by a couple of teenagers," Hughes said. "But it was my own damn fault for meddling where I didn't belong."

"Oh, Dave, how horrible—"

"I'll live. Are you sure it was a garter snake?"

"Positive. You know how much of a bug I used to be on nature. It was a little bit of a snake, maybe eight or nine inches long, and I saw it clearly. But Ellen wouldn't take any chances."

"No, she wouldn't. How long ago did she leave?"

"An hour. Lorraine Bruson drove her in. She ought to be back any minute. Dave, you didn't get

hurt badly, did you?"

He shrugged impatiently. "I told you, I'll survive. Just a shiner and some bruises and a slightly dented rib, is all." He knelt, picked up his nephew, tried to lift him. But—though the boy weighed less than forty pounds—the effort was too much, this time. Fearful of his cracked rib, Hughes abandoned the gesture quickly. The little boy looked up, disappointed and puzzled.

"Tony got bitten," he announced.

"I know, Larry. You musn't bother snakes, or they'll hurt you. You—"

He stopped. Another car had entered the bungalow area, and was coming to a halt nearby. Lorraine Bruson got out, wearing a sunsuit that barely was able to contain her fantastic breasts. Ellen got out, wearing a less flamboyant sunsuit. With her were the children—Erika looking grave and solemn, Tony very pale and uncertain. There was a bandage round one of Tony's fingers.

"Dave!" Ellen cried.

She ran toward him, thankfully, throwing herself against him with an impact that jarred him and sent tremors of pain through his entire body. "Oh, darling," she said, "if you only knew what a nightmare today had been! Tony got bitten by a snake, and I was trying to call you but the girl said you were sick, and I couldn't reach you anywhere, and all of a sudden you come out of nowhere—"

"How's Tony?" he asked brusquely.

"He'll be all right," Ellen said. "I was scared out of my wits when the snake bit him—it was just a little snake, but it was hanging from his finger, you

know. Beth said it was harmless, but I didn't want to take chances. The doctor showed me a picture of the snake it was, and it *was* a harmless one. He gave Tony a shot of something, though, and bandaged the bite, and it's all okay now."

Kneeling—the posture made him wince with pain—Hughes kissed his daughter and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Someday I'll have to show you how you catch snakes, old man," he said. "You need a forked stick, and you pin the snake down back of the neck, so he can't bite you. How are you feeling now?"

"I'm fine, daddy," Tony said gravely. "Daddy, why is your face all puffy?"

He straightened up quickly. Ellen stared at him, as though noticing his bruises for the first time. She had been so preoccupied with the snakebite incident that her mind had not even registered the fact that her husband looked different, and that he was here a day early.

Now she said, "Your face—it's all bruised, Dave! And you didn't go to work today. I didn't even ask you. What in the name of heaven happened to you?"

The story roared through his mind: the midnight stroll, the attempt to intercede, the attack, the savage fists of the two teenage beasts. But at the same moment he blotted the lying story out.

I won't, he said. *I won't tell her that lie.*

He realized in one quick flash that this day would be a turning-point; that he had wandered far from those he loved, and today he could either win his way back to them or else lose them forever.

He said quietly, "It's a complicated story, Ellen. I'll talk to you about it upstairs."

She frowned. "Must you be so mysterious?"

"Upstairs," he said. "Not here."

Beth was looking at him strangely. Hughes patted Tony again and walked into the house, and Ellen followed him, telling the children to go play with Aunt Beth.

In their bedroom, with the door closed, Ellen said, "I'm soaked with sweat, after all that excitement. I'll change into my swimsuit, I think. Now, what's all the mystery? How did you get so terribly bruised?"

Hughes stared off into nowhere, saying nothing. Ellen unclipped her halter, unbuttoned her shorts. wriggled out of her panties. She was nude before him, and still a good-looking woman, he thought. The summer sun had helped her. Her breasts looked full and young again, her thighs were lean, her gently rounded stomach was slimmed down to beauty. She turned, facing him, and he desired her in that moment, but he forced the thought back.

"You might as well look at the complete job," he said heavily. He took the sunglasses off. "There. I've also got a cracked rib, but it's healing."

"*Dave*!" she gasped, at the sight of his eye. She ran across the room, naked, kneeling where he sat, holding his knees. "For God's sake, tell me what happened!"

"All right," he said. He took a deep breath. "I was in a fight. I was beaten up." His eyes did not meet hers. "I was beaten up by a jealous husband," he said, "because he caught me philandering with his wife."

"This is no time to joke—"

"I'm not joking," he said in a bitter voice. "The girl was Janice Keller. I had an affair with her during the past two weeks. It came to an end—violently—Tuesday night."

Ellen said nothing. In the silence, Hughes heard his own voice going on, telling Ellen how it had begun with his own loneliness, with his infantile urge to "get even" with her for her coldness toward him by taking a mistress. He described how the affair had gone, leaving out only the intimate details. He told of his struggles to break loose, of the many times he had tried to end it, of the rebirth of his love for his wife. And of his weakness, his inability to put an end to the affair until it was ended by Nick Keller's savage fists. He told how Janice had gone to California, putting finish to any possibility of a continuation.

"So there's the whole gory story," he finished. "The decline and fall of David Hughes. I suppose you'll get custody of the kids, and I'm going to be miserable about that. But at least I told you the truth. I couldn't let myself go living a lie for the rest of my life. This is the first time I ever deceived you, Ellen. That part of it is just as true as anything else I just told you."

She looked up at him. There were tears in her eyes. "My poor darling," she whispered.

"Don't you hate me?"

She shook her head.

"But I deceived you," he said. "I had an affair with another woman. A younger woman."

She was smiling strangely. "Beth warned me," she said. "She told me I'd lose you unless I showed

you I still loved you. So I tried—last weekend—but I guess it was too late, by then. You had already started to drift away."

"Yes. I was under her spell already."

"It could have been avoided, though. If I had been a better wife, I—"

"Don't say it's my fault," he muttered. "It was all my greed, my selfishness—"

"What you did wasn't right," she said. "It was a horrible thing to do. But you had justification. Beth showed me that. And at least you came to tell me about what you did. There's something noble in that, Dave. You didn't *have* to tell me. You could have made up some lie about the beating, and gone on as if nothing had happened."

"I considered that. But—I couldn't."

"I'm glad, Dave. I'm glad you told me what you did."

"You don't hate me?"

"I—love you," she said softly.

Hughes stared at her incredulously. "After what I did?"

"You made a mistake. But it was a mistake I drove you to, darling. I see that now. I was so wrapped up in the kids, in the house and everything, I was hardly noticing *you*. And the inevitable happened. Can you ever forgive me, Dave?"

"I cheat on *you* and you ask for forgiveness? I'm the one who belongs down on his knees."

"We've both made mistakes, Dave. But now perhaps we see each other a little more clearly." She took his hands in hers. "Dave—do you still love that girl? Even a little bit?"

He looked at her steadily. "No," he said after a moment's thought.

"Not the slightest?"

"Not any more," he said. "I love only you."

"I love you, too, Dave."

Then his hands were on her naked breasts, and she was rising, pressing her body against his, holding him gently so as not to hurt him, and her lips brushed coolly over his bruised face, while his hands slipped from her breasts to her hips to the softness of her buttocks. She led him to the bed and unbuttoned his shirt, and looked at the tape on his ribs, and then she removed the rest of his clothes and they began to make love, gently, with deep mutual tenderness. Hughes held his wife's body in his arms as they shuddered out their climax at the same moment.

"We'd better go downstairs," he said. "Beth is going to be puzzled about what's going on here."

"Let her be puzzled," Ellen said. "I've just discovered I'm in love all over again. Does it hurt when I kiss you?"

"Only a little."

"Will you always love me, Dave?"

"Always."

She cradled his tired head against her breasts, and he closed his eyes. Everything was going to be all right from now on, he thought. He had been through a little bit of hell, but he had come out, and he still had Ellen, and their love was deeper now than it had been in many years. He smiled, despite the pain it involved, and tenderly kissed her breasts, and clasped her to him once again in deepest love.

THE END

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